

Narsai

Edited by
AARON M. BUTTS,
KRISTIAN S. HEAL,
and ROBERT A. KITCHEN

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121

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Narsai

Rethinking his Work and his World

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Aaron M. Butts, Kristian S. Heal,
and Robert A. Kitchen

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Preface

The editors of the present volume direct a project to translate all the extant *mēmṛē*, or metrical homilies, of Narsai (d. ca. 500) into English. The *mēmṛē* are being translated by an international team of almost three dozen scholars. In the summer of 2017, the three of us – with Kristian Heal taking the lead – organized a workshop on Narsai in Provo, Utah on the beautiful campus of Brigham Young University. This workshop was an opportunity for translators associated with this project, as well as a few others, to share early gleanings from their sustained readings of Narsai. Given how little has been published on Narsai to date, it was decided that the fruits of this workshop should be collected and published. Thus, the present volume aims to disseminate to a wider audience current, on-going research being conducted on Narsai with the hope of sparking more interest in this most important and influential fifth-century figure.

Aaron M. Butts
Kristian S. Heal
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Table of Contents

Preface	V
Abbreviations	IX
Citation of <i>Mēmṛē</i> by Narsai	XIII
Transcription of Syriac	XV

Aaron Michael Butts

Narsai's Life and Work	1
------------------------------	---

Daniel Becerra

Exegesis, Askesis, and Identity: Narsai's <i>Mēmṛā on the Parable of the Ten Virgins</i>	9
--	---

Adam H. Becker

Names in Fervent Water: Ritual and the Mediating Power of the Divine Name in Narsai's <i>Mēmṛē</i>	25
--	----

Dmitrij F. Bumazhnov

Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism and Merkabah Mysticism around the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis: Narsai's Polemics against Deniers of Biblical Studies in Context	41
--	----

Jeff W. Childers

In Search of Jesus: Performative Christology in Narsai's <i>Mēmṛē</i> on Baptism	69
--	----

Philip Michael Forness

The Construction of Metrical Poetry in the Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Serugh	93
--	----

Kelli Bryant Gibson

An Early Syriac <i>Apologia Crucis</i> : <i>Mēmṛā</i> 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'	117
---	-----

Kristian S. Heal

Narsai and the Scriptural Self	133
--------------------------------------	-----

Robert A. Kitchen

The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology
in the *Mēmṛē* of Narsai 145

Craig E. Morrison

The Faculty of Discernment in Narsai 161

Ellen Muehlberger

Extraordinary Conceptions: Insemination and Theories of Reproduction
in Narsai's Thought 175

Eva M. Rodrigo Gómez

Painting Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Narsai 187

Erin Galgay Walsh

"How the Weak Rib Prevailed!": Eve and the Canaanite Woman
in the Poetry of Narsai 199

J. Edward Walters

Where Soul Meets Body: Narsai's Depiction of the Soul-Body
Relationship in Context 227

Bibliography 255

Contributors 281

Indices 283

Abbreviations

Journals, Series, and Reference Works

AB	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
AJP	<i>The American Journal of Philology</i>
AJSL	<i>The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
AJT	<i>Asia Journal of Theology</i>
AKM	Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes
ANF	A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–1896).
AOS	American Oriental Series
BCOT	Bible in the Christian Orthodox Tradition
BÉHÉS	Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences religieuses
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BHM	<i>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</i>
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale</i>
BJRULM	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BM	Bibliothèque du Muséon
BTS	Beiruter Texte und Studien
BUSE	Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CBP	Cahiers de Biblia Patristica
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CHRC	<i>Church History and Religious Culture</i>
CLC	Collection lettres chrétiennes
CO	<i>Christian Orient</i>
CP	<i>Classical Philology</i>
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
CS	Cistercian Studies
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly</i>
CUA SCA	Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity
CW	<i>The Classical Weekly</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
EBCO	Eichstätter Beiträge zum Christlichen Orient
ECCA	Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity
ECR	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
ÉS	Études syriaques
ETJ	<i>Ephrem's Theological Journal</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
FKDG	Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte

FoC	Fathers of the Church
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
GECS	Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies
GEDSH	S. P. Brock, A. M. Butts, G. A. Kiraz, and L. Van Rompay (eds.), <i>Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage</i> (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011).
GOS	Göttinger Orientforschungen, I. Reihe: Syriaca
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
Hugoye	<i>Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies</i>
JA	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
JAJ	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
JCPs	Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series
JCSSS	<i>Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JL	Janus Linguarum
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KAL	Kommentare zur apokryphen Literatur
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LOS	London Oriental Series
LSS	Leipziger semitistische Studien, n. F.
MFC	Message of the Fathers of the Church
MPI	Monographs of The Peshitta Institute
MUSJ	<i>Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph</i>
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NHS	Nag Hammadi Studies
NPEPP	A. Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (eds.), <i>The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
NPNF	P. Schaff (ed.), <i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> (New York: Scribner, 1898–1909).
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
OC	<i>Oriens Christianus</i>
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OPO	Orientalia – Patristica – Oecumenica
OS	<i>L'Orient Syrien</i>
PA	Philosophia Antiqua
PETSE	Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile
PG	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologia cursus completus, Series Graeca</i> (Paris: Bibliothecae cleri universae, 1857–1866).
PIRSB	Publications de l'Institut Romand des Sciences Bibliques

PL	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologia cursus completus, Series Latina</i> . (Paris: Bibliothecae cleri universae, 1844–1864).
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
PS	Patrologia Syriaca
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
RAC	T. Klausner et al. (eds.), <i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–).
SA	Studia Anselmiana
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCE	<i>Studies in Christian Ethics</i>
SCH	<i>Studies in Church History</i>
SCS	Syrian Churches Series
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SI	Studia Iranica
SJ	Studia Judaica
SOPJ	<i>Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Journal</i>
SP	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
SSB	Semitica et Semitohamitica Berolinensia
STAC	Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum
STJ	<i>Stulos Theological Journal</i>
SymSyr I	<i>Symposium Syriacum 1972. Célébré dans les jours 26–31 octobre 1972 à l'Institut pontifical oriental de Rome</i> (OCA 197; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1974).
SymSyr III	R. Lavenant (ed.), <i>III^e Symposium Syriacum, 1980. Les contacts du monde syriaque avec les autres cultures</i> (Goslar 7–11 Septembre 1980) (OCA 221; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1983).
SymSyr IV	H. J. W. Drijvers, R. Lavenant, C. Molenberg, and G. J. Reinink (eds.), <i>IV Symposium Syriacum, 1984. Literary Genres in Syriac Literature</i> (Groningen – Oosterhesselen 10–12 September) (OCA 229; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987).
SymSyr V	R. Lavenant (ed.), <i>V Symposium Syriacum. Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, 29–31 août 1988</i> (OCA 236; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990).
SymSyr VII	R. Lavenant (ed.), <i>Symposium Syriacum VII. Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages, 11–14 August 1996</i> (OCA 256; Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1998).
TCH	Transformation of the Classical Heritage
TeCLA	Texts from Christian Late Antiquity
TEG	Traditio Exegetica Graeca
TS	<i>Theological Studies</i>
TT	Textes et Traditions
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VCSS	Variorum Collected Studies Series
VTQ	<i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>

WS	<i>Wiener Studien</i>
WS	Woodbrooke Studies
WSA	Works of Saint Augustine
YJS	Yale Judaica Series
ZDMG	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
ZK	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
ZMR	<i>Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft</i>
ZNF	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Citation of *Mēmṛē* by Narsai

Mēmṛē by Narsai are cited according to the conventional numbering system, as established in A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905). Short-titles are optionally included, generally based on S. P. Brock, “A Guide to Narsai’s Homilies,” *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40. In addition to the *mēmṛā* number (and optional short-title), reference is made to one of the published editions, when available, in the following format: *Mēmṛā* 3 ‘*On the Revelation of Abraham*’ (ed. Mingana 1.58.4), where “1” refers to the volume, “58” refers to the page, and “4” refers to the line. Abbreviations for the published editions are as follows:

Frishman	J. Frishman, <i>The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai</i> (Ph.D. Diss., Universiteit Leiden, 1992).
Gignoux	P. Gignoux, <i>Homélies de Narsai sur la création</i> (PO 34.2–4; Turnhout: Brepols, 1968).
McLeod	F. G. McLeod, <i>Narsai’s Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension</i> (PO 40.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979).
Mingana	A. Mingana, <i>Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina</i> (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905).
Patriarchal Press	Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, <i>Homilies of Mar Narsai</i> (San Francisco: Patriarchal Press, 1970).
Siman	E. P. Siman, <i>Narsai. Cinq homélies sur les paraboles évangéliques</i> (Paris: Cariscript, 1984).

If a *mēmṛā* has not yet been edited, a reference to manuscript and folio are provided, using the same format as above, *mutatis mutandis*, e.g., *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Women*’ (ms. Vat. Syr. 594, f. 58a.3–4), where ‘3–4’ refers to the lines.

A reference to a published translation is sometimes added in the parenthesis, as in the following: *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.359; trans. R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* [Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 8.1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909], 36).

A similar citation system is used for homilies by Narsai’s contemporary Jacob of Serugh, with the abbreviation “Bedjan” referring to P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910).

Transcription of Syriac

Consonants

Syriac consonants are transcribed as ' *b, g, d, h, w, z, ḥ, t, y, k, l, m, n, s, ʿ, p, ṣ, q, r, š,* and *t.*

Vowels

Transcription	Syriac Name	Examples
<i>a</i>	<i>ptāhā</i>	<i>malkā</i> ܡܠܟܐ
<i>ā</i>	<i>zqāpā</i>	<i>hāšā</i> ܚܫܐ
<i>e</i>	<i>rbāšā</i>	<i>lebbā</i> ܠܒܐ
<i>ē</i>	<i>rbāšā (karyā)</i>	<i>lēlyā</i> ܠܝܠܐ
<i>i</i>	<i>hbāšā</i>	<i>bišā</i> ܒܝܫܐ
<i>u</i>	<i>šāšā</i>	<i>gušmā</i> ܓܘܫܡܐ
<i>o</i>	<i>šāšā rwiḥā</i>	<i>gšom</i> ܓܫܝܡܐ

Other

- Schwa is not indicated, e.g., *kṭab* ‘he wrote’ and not *kəṭab*.
- Gemination is indicated, e.g., *lebbā* ‘heart’ and not *lebā*.
- Spirantization (*rukkākā*) is marked as *ḥ, ḡ, ḏ, k, p,* and *t*, e.g., *kṭab* and not *ktab*.
- *Matres lectionis* are not indicated, e.g., *guṣmā* for *جُصْمَا* with the *waw* not indicated.
- Apart from *matres lectionis*, ‘silent’ consonants (i.e., those with *mbaṭṭilānā*) are written within parenthesis, e.g., *malkaw(hy)* ‘his kings’ and *biṣ(hu)* ‘he is evil’.

Example

تَجَسَّسُ مَا فِي سَائِرِ الْمَلِكِ مِنْ مَلِكٍ إِلَى مَلِكٍ

brēšit 'itaw(hy) (h)wā mellta whu mellta 'itaw(hy) (h)wā lwāt 'alāhā

Narsai's Life and Work*

Aaron Michael Butts

Narsai, who is variously called “the tongue of the East” and “the harp of the Spirit,” is among the most important and influential Syriac authors.¹ His life spanned the fifth century, which was a tumultuous time for Christians following the controversies surrounding the First Council of Ephesus (431), the Second Council of Ephesus (449), and the Council of Chalcedon (451) and its aftermath.² Playing a crucial role at this critical juncture, Narsai would ultimately be remembered as one of the foundational figures of the Church of the East.³

* I am grateful to Simcha Gross, Kristian Heal, Robert Kitchen, Alessandro Mengozzi, and especially Lucas Van Rompay for their constructive comments on this overview.

¹ An up-to-date biography and study of Narsai remains a *desideratum*. For now, the best overview of Narsai, albeit a brief one, is L. Van Rompay, “Narsai,” in *GEDSH*, 303–304, to which the current overview is heavily indebted. For more details, see J. Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai* (Ph.D. Diss., Universiteit Leiden, 1992), part 3 as well as the more-dated A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266; Leuven: Peeters, 1965), 57–121. The two epithets given above are found in the tenth-century *Chronicle of Siirt* (ed. A. Scher, J. Périer, P. Dib, and R. Griveau, *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]* [PO 4.3, 5.2, 7.2, 13.4; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907–1909], 2.1.114) and the *Catalogue of Books* by ‘Abdisho’ bar Brikha (d. 1318) (ed. J. S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* [Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719–1728], 3.1.63), respectively. On the *Chronicle of Siirt*, see recently P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² The last fifteen years have seen the publication of a number of important monographs on this period, including, *inter alia*, S. Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); V. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); P. Wood, *We Have no King but Christ: Christian Political Thought in Greater Syria on the Eve of the Arab Conquest, 400–c.585* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); D. A. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Y. Moss, *Incorruptible Bodies: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); J. Behr, *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); M. Papoutsakis, *Vicarious Kingship: A Theme in Syriac Political Theology in Late Antiquity* (STAC 100; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); P. M. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ For introductions to the Church of the East, see W. Baum and D. W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge, 2003) and C. Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006). The Church of the East is sometimes called “Nestorian,” especially in earlier scholarly literature; this term

What is known of Narsai's life derives principally from two texts associated with the School of Nisibis: *The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* by Barḥadbshabba (late 6th/early 7th cent.) and the *Ecclesiastical History* also attributed to one Barḥadbshabba, who may or may not be the same person.⁴ According to these hagiographic narratives, Narsai was born in 'Ayn Dulba near Ma'alta in northern Mesopotamia, within the Sasanian Empire.⁵ At the age of 16, he was orphaned and came under the guardianship of his uncle Emmanuel, who was abbot of the Monastery of Kfar Mari. After spending time at the Monastery of Kfar Mari, Narsai studied at the famous School of Edessa, eventually becoming a teacher (*mallpānā*) there and ultimately its director (*rabbān*).⁶ Narsai's tenure as director is said to have lasted for two decades and ended with his expulsion from the school. The exact date of Narsai's expulsion is debated, but it must have taken place before the school's closure by the emperor Zeno in 489 due to

is, however, best avoided since it is not a self-identification but rather a pejorative used by the theological opponents of the Church of the East (see S. P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *BJRULM* 78 [1996]: 23–35; reprinted in idem, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* [VCSS 863; Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006], no. 1).

⁴ The former text is edited in A. Scher, *Mar Barḥadbšabba 'Arbaya. Évêque de Ḥalwan (VI^e siècle). Cause de la fondation des écoles* (PO 4.4; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907), 319–404, with an English translation in A. H. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (TTH 50; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 165–171. The latter is edited in F. Nau, *La seconde partie de l'histoire de Barḥadbšabba 'Arbaia* (PO 9.5; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1913), 588–615, with an English translation in Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, 40–85. For discussion of the authorship of these two texts, see A. H. Becker and J. W. Childers, "Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya," in *GEDSH*, 57–58 and, with more detail, Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, 11–16. For the construction of Narsai in these sources, see K. Pinggéra, "Das Bild Narsais des Großen bei Barḥadbšabbā 'Arbāyā. Zum theologischen Profil der 'Geschichte der heiligen Väter'," in A. Mustafa, J. Tubach, and G. S. Vashalomidze (eds.), *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2007), 245–259. An abbreviated form of some of the material on Narsai in the *Ecclesiastical History* is also found in the *Chronicle of Siirt* (ed. A. Scher et al., *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]*, 2.1.114–117, 136–137).

⁵ For the Sasanian context of Narsai, see S. W. Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict* (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990). A new history of Syriac Christians in the Sasanian Empire is needed. The classic study of J. Labourt (*Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse sous la dynastie Sassanide* [Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1904]) has long been outdated, in terms of data and, even more so, in terms of methodology. Better is A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1936), but it is still in need of update. Several recent studies have opened new avenues of research on Christians in the Sasanian Empire, especially R. E. Payne, *A State of Mixture. Christians, Zoroastrians and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) and K. Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia: Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). See also the recent overview in G. Herman, "The Syriac World in the Persian Empire," in D. King (ed.), *The Syriac World* (London: Routledge, 2019), 134–145.

⁶ For the school of Edessa, see A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). A number of the relevant primary sources are conveniently translated in Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*.

its dyophysite teaching.⁷ Expelled from the School of Edessa, Narsai proceeded to Nisibis, where he was received by Barṣawma, bishop of Nisibis.⁸ According to the texts attributed to Barḥadbshabba, Barṣawma persuaded Narsai to found a new school in Nisibis, the School of Nisibis.⁹ Narsai is said to have had a falling out with Barṣawma at some point, possibly due to the latter's marriage to a former nun, Mamai, but eventually Narsai and Barṣawma were reconciled.¹⁰ Narsai remained head of the School of Nisibis until his death sometime around 500.

At the School of Edessa, Narsai was among the first generation of Syriac authors to encounter the works of the Antiochene theologians and exegetes, which were being translated from Greek into Syriac.¹¹ These Antiochene writings would

⁷ See the discussion in A. Vööbus, "Un vestige d'une lettre de Narsai et son importance historique," *OS* (1964): 515–523, esp. 522–523; idem, *History of the School of Nisibis*, 43–44; Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 2–3; Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom*, 74–75; Van Rompay, "Narsai," in *GEDSH*, 303.

⁸ For Barṣawma, see A. H. Becker, "Barṣawma of Nisibis," in *GEDSH*, 58–59 and, with more detail, S. Gero, *Barṣawma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century* (CSCO 426; Leuven: Peeters, 1981).

⁹ In contrast, the *Chronicle of Siirt* presents Narsai as joining an already existing school that would later be supported by Barṣawma (ed. Scher et al., *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]*, 2.1.114).

¹⁰ The *Ecclesiastical History* of Barḥadbshabba presents Narsai as composing two *mēmre* related to this incident involving Mamai and Barṣawma: *Mēmra* 25 'On Reproof' (ed. Mingana 1.210–223) and *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.353–365). On these two *mēmre*, see C. Molenberg, "As if from Another World: Narsai's Memra 'Bad is the Time'," in H. L. J. Vanstiphout (ed.), *All Those Nations ... Cultural Encounters Within and With the Near East: Studies Presented to Han Drijvers at the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday by Colleagues and Students* (COMERS / ICOG Communications 2; Groningen: STYX Publications, 1999), 101–108 and eadem, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof of Eve's Daughters and the 'Tricks and Devices' They Perform," *Le Muséon* 106 (1993): 65–87, respectively. See also Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, 67 fn. 147, who rightfully doubts the potential autobiographical nature of these two *mēmre*: It seems equally, if not more likely, that Barḥadbshabba has invented this historical context for these two *mēmre*.

¹¹ This translation activity at the School of Edessa is explicitly mentioned by Narsai's miaophysite contemporary Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) in his *Letter 14* (ed. G. Olinder, *Iacobi Sarugensis Epistulae quotquot supersunt* [CSCO 110; Leuven: Peeters, 1937], 58–61; trans. A. M. Butts, "Jacob of Serugh, *Letter 14*," in M. DelCogliano [ed.], *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, vol. 3. *Christ* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming]). For Jacob and his thought, see recently Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East*. Comparisons between Narsai and Jacob have been a focus of scholarship on Narsai: See, e.g., L. Van Rompay, "Humanity's Sin in Paradise: Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai in Conversation," in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Serugh and His Times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (GECS 8; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 199–217; G. A. Anderson, "Christus Victor in the Work of Ephrem, Narsai, and Jacob of Serugh," in N. V. Harrison and D. G. Hunter (eds.), *Suffering and Evil in Early Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 57–80; R. A. Kitchen, "Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai," *SP* 78 (2017): 73–84; E. G. Walsh, "Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh Preaching the Canaanite Woman," *SP* 78 (2017): 85–98; M. Papoutsakis, "United in the Strife That Divided Them: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh on the Ascension of Christ," *Δελτίο Βιβλικῶν Μελετῶν* 32 (2017): 45–77.

have a deep impact on Narsai to the point that he would pen a *mēm̄rā* on the “Three Greek Doctors,” in which he traced his lineage explicitly back to Diodore of Tarsus (d. 390), Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), and Nestorius (d. 450).¹² Among these “three Greek doctors” none was more influential on Narsai than Theodore of Mopsuestia, whose thought thoroughly imbues Narsai’s writings.¹³ At the same time, however, Narsai is also indebted to the earlier Syriac tradition, including especially Ephrem (d. 373).¹⁴ Navigating a course through this dual heritage – Ephrem on the one hand and Theodore and the other Greek Antiochenes on the other, Narsai would ultimately become the most foundational theologian articulating a dyophysite Christology in Syriac.¹⁵ Narsai’s impact is not, however, limited to Christology but extends to a number of other domains

¹² This is *Mēm̄rā II* (ed. J. P. P. Martin, “Homélie de Narsès sur les trois docteurs nestoriens,” *JA* 9.14 [1899]: 446–493 [Syriac]; 9.15 [1900]: 469–525 [French translation]). For studies, see D. Haneberg, “Drei nestorianische Kirchenlieder,” *ZDMG* 3 (1849): 231–242; P. Sfaiir, “L’ortodossia di Narsai rilevata dalla sua omelia sui Dottori greci,” *Bessarione* III, 14 (1917): 313–317; L. Abramowski, “Das Konzil von Chalkedon in der Homilie des Narsès über die drei nestorianischen Lehrer,” *ZK* 66 (1954–1955): 140–143; K. E. McVey, “The *Mēm̄rā* of Narsai on the Three Nestorian Doctors as an Example of Forensic Rhetoric,” in *SymSyr* III, 87–96; N. Kavvadas, “Narsais Homilie ‘Über die Väter, die Lehrer Diodor von Tarsos, Theodor von Mopsuestia und Nestorios,’” *Sacris Erudiri* 51 (2012): 215–232; E. Perotti, *I tre dottori greci e la produzione dell’ortodossia in Narsai* (M.A. Thesis, Università degli Studi di Torino, 2015).

¹³ See T. Jansma, “Études sur la pensée de Narsai. L’Homélie no XXXIV: Essai d’interprétation,” *OS* 11 (1966): 147–168, 265–290, 393–429; P. Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création* (PO 34.2–4; Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 470–495; Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.34–37, *passim*; F. McLeod, “Narsai’s dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia,” *JCSSS* 7 (2007): 18–38; F. Thome, “Jona – Typus Christi. Narsais Memra über Jona im Lichte der Exegese Theodors von Mopsuestia zum Jonabuch,” in D. Bumazhnov, E. Grypeou, T. Sailors, and A. Toepel (eds.), *Bibel, Byzanz und christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag* (OLA 187; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 363–386; S. V. Fomicheva, “Educational Background of Mar Narsai: Between the ‘Tradition of the School’ and Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Exegesis,” in P. Bruns and T. Kremer (eds.), *Studia Syriaca: Beiträge des IX. Deutschen Syrologentages in Eichstätt 2016* (EBCO 6; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 61–70.

¹⁴ Most emphatically, see T. Jansma, “Narsai’s Homilies on Creation: Remarks on a Recent Edition,” *Le Muséon* 83 (1970): 209–235; idem, “Narsai and Ephraem: Some Observations on Narsai’s Homilies on Creation and Ephraem’s Hymns on Faith,” *PdO* 1 (1970): 49–68; idem, “Narsai’s dubbele erfenis. Enkele opmerkingen over de invloed van Theodorus van Mopsueste en van Efraïm de Syriër,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* NS 51 (1970–1971): 1–15. These articles are a response to Gignoux, who considers Ephrem to have had little importance for Narsai (see Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création*, 470). For Gignoux’s response to Jansma’s critiques, see P. Gignoux, “Réflexions sur l’article de M. Jansma,” *Le Muséon* 83 (1970): 237–240. For later studies, a couple of which also bring Jacob of Serugh into the conversation, see Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.37–39, 180–183, *passim*; Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof of Eve’s Daughters and the ‘Tricks and Devices’ They Perform”; Van Rompay, “Humanity’s Sin in Paradise.”

¹⁵ For Narsai’s Christology, see J. Frishman, “Narsai’s Christology according to his Homily ‘On the Word became Flesh,’” *Harp* 8/9 (1995/96), 289–303; A. Satyaputra, “Reexamining Narsai’s Christology: On the Two Natures of Christ,” *STJ* 6:1–2 (1998): 23–32. For the dual heritage of Narsai, see Jansma’s studies in the previous footnote, including especially his title “Narsai’s dubbele erfenis” for my language, along with the dissent by Gignoux.

in theology, including liturgical theology, sacramental theology, eschatology, soteriology, pneumatology, and Mariology, to name only a few.¹⁶ In addition, no figure writing in Syriac shaped East Syriac biblical exegesis, especially in its nascent stage, more than Narsai.¹⁷

Given his importance for the Church of the East, Narsai understandably has a wide and varied *Nachleben*. The Catholicos Timothy I (d. 823), for instance, mentions Narsai a number of times throughout his letters: In *Letter 47*, for instance, Timothy requests that a manuscript of *mēmre* by Narsai be copied and sent to him.¹⁸ Isho'dad of Merv (fl. ca. 850) frequently relies on Narsai in his bib-

¹⁶ Among the many relevant publications that could be cited here, see P. Gignoux, "Les doctrines eschatologiques de Narsai," *OS 11* (1966): 321–352, 461–488; 12 (1967): 23–54; F. G. McLeod, *The Soteriology of Narsai* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1973); I. Arickappallil, *The Holy Spirit in Narsai of Nisibis: A Theological Synthesis* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1992); idem, "The Pneumatological Vision of Mar Narsai," *The Harp* 8–9 (1995–1996): 195–208; M. A. Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters: The Baptismal Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis," *SP* 33 (1997): 534–547; F. Kanichikattil, *Divine Liturgy in the Vision of Narsai* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2003); A. Harrak, "Memra 33 of Narsai: The Sacramental Nature of the 'Church of the Nations,'" *PdO* 41 (2015): 181–203; S. Joseph, "Askese und Gelehrsamkeit: Das monastische Leben des Narsai von Nisibis, ein ostsyrisches Beispiel," in D. W. Winkler (ed.), *Syrische Studien: Beiträge zum 8. Deutschen Syrologie-Symposium in Salzburg 2014* (OPO 10; Wien: LIT Verlag, 2016), 73–79.

¹⁷ For a brief overview, see L. Van Rompay, "The Christian Syriac Tradition of Interpretation," in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. I. *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (Until 1300)*, part 1. *Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 635–636. For studies, see, *inter alia*, J. Frishman, "Type and Reality in the Exegetical Homilies of Mar Narsai," *SP* 20 (1989): 169–175; eadem, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, especially part 3; K. S. Heal, "Reworking the Biblical Text in the Dramatic Dialogue Poems on the Old Testament Patriarch Joseph," in R. B. ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy. Papers Read at the Third Peshitta Symposium* (MPI 15; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 87–98; T. Kuzhuppil, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah: A Theological Study of Narsai's Interpretation of Isaiah 6* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2006); R. A. Kitchen, "Winking at Jonah: Narsai's Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East," in V. S. Hovhannessian (ed.), *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East* (BCOT 1; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 51–56; Thome, "Jona – Typos Christi;" C. Pasquet, "La distinction créateur/création: Principe et fondement de l'interprétation de Gn 1, 1–2 chez Éphrem et Narsai (IVe–Ve siècles)," in B. Bakhouché (ed.), *Science et exégèse: Les interprétations antiques et médiévales du récit biblique de la création des éléments (Genèse 1,1–8)* (BÉHÉSIR 167; Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 129–145; K. S. Heal, "Construal and Construction of Genesis in Early Syriac Sermons," *SP* 78 (2017): 25–32; Kitchen, "Three Young Men Redux"; idem, "Which One Is He? Narsai of Nisibis on Moses and the Divine Name and Essence and a Few Plagues," *JCSSS* 18 (2018): 15–23.

¹⁸ For Timothy I, see V. Berti, *Vita e studi di Timoteo I patriarca cristiano di Baghdad* (SI 41; Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2009). The *Letters* by Timothy I are in the process of being (re-)edited by M. Heimgartner: *Timotheos I, Ostsyrischer Patriarch, Disputation mit dem Kalifen Al-Mahdi* (CSCO 631–632; Leuven: Peeters, 2011); *Die Briefe 42–58 des ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos I* (CSCO 644–645; Leuven: Peeters, 2012); *Die Briefe 30–39 des ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos I* (CSCO 661–662; Leuven: Peeters, 2016); *Die Briefe 40 und 41 des ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos I* (CSCO 673–674; Leuven: Peeters, 2019). This particular reference is found in Heimgartner, *Die Briefe 42–58 des Ostsyrischen Patriarchen Timotheos I*, 87.29–30 (Syriac), 72 (GT). An earlier edition is available in O. Braun, "Ein

lical commentaries, citing him by name a number of times.¹⁹ A century later, Emmanuel bar Shakhare (d. 980) makes extensive use of Narsai in his *Hexaameron*, which consists of twenty-eight *mēmṛē*, the first of which is actually probably by Narsai.²⁰ To take one final example, the thirteenth-century poet Gewargis Warda draws significantly from Narsai in his collection of poems (*ʿonyāṭā*).²¹

Narsai is said to have authored a sizeable oeuvre. The largest inventory is given by ‘Abdisho’ bar Brikha in his *Catalogue of Books*:

commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, (Joshua) Bar Nun, Judges, Qohelet, Isaiah, the Twelve (prophets), Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Prophecy of Daniel as well as *mēmṛē* in twelve volumes, 360 in number. He also had a liturgy and an interpretation of the sacraments and baptism as well as consolations with sermons, praises, proclamations, adorations, and a book on the depravity of life.²²

The *Ecclesiastical History* of Barḥadbshabba similarly states that Narsai composed a *mēmṛā* for each day of the year, whereas the *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* gives the number of *mēmṛē* as around 300, along with other writings.²³ Among all these works, only a little over eighty *mēmṛē* of Narsai’s survive.²⁴

Brief des Katholikos Timotheos I über biblische Studien des 9. Jahrhunderts,” OC 1 (1901): 299–313. For an English translation of this letter, see S. P. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1997), 245–250.

¹⁹ Isho’dad’s commentary on the Old Testament is edited in J.-M. Vosté and C. Van den Eynde, *Isho’dad de Merv. Commentaire de l’Ancien Testament*, I (CSCO 126; Leuven: Peeters, 1950); C. Van den Eynde, *Isho’dad de Merv. Commentaire de l’Ancien Testament*, I, II–VI (CSCO 156, 176, 179, 229–230, 303–304, 328–29, 433–34; Leuven: Peeters, 1950–1981). See also Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.7, 185–186, *passim*.

²⁰ See Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.17 and L. Van Rompay, “Emmanuel bar Shakhare,” in *GEDSH*, 143–144 as well as, with more detail, E. ten Napel, “The Textual Tradition of Emmanuel bar Shakhare’s Hexaameron in the Light of the Monastic School Tradition,” *SP* 18 (1990): 289–295.

²¹ See A. Pritula, “Die Hymnensammlung Wardā und die Homilien Narsais: Wege der syrischen Dichtung im 13. Jahrhundert,” in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Orientalische Christen und Europa: Kulturbeggnung zwischen Interferenz, Partizipation und Antizipation* (GOS 41; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 159–171; idem, *The Wardā: An East Syriac Hymnological Collection. Study and Critical Edition* (GOS 47; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015), 133–143, *passim*.

²² Ed. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, 3.1.63–66. A similar, but slightly shorter inventory is found in the earlier, tenth-century *Chronicle of Siirt* (ed. Scher et al., *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]*, 2.1.115).

²³ *Ecclesiastical History* (ed. Nau, *La seconde partie de l’histoire de Barhadbesabba ‘Arbaia*, 612; trans. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, 69); *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools* (ed. Scher, *Mar Barhadbsabba ‘Arbaya. Évêque de Halwan [VI^e siècle]. Cause de la fondation des écoles*, 386; trans. Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis*, 152).

²⁴ The most convenient listing of the extant *mēmṛē* attributed to Narsai is S. P. Brock, “A Guide to Narsai’s Homilies,” *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40. For one potential addition, see A. M. Butts, “Reclaiming Narsai’s *Mēmṛā* of the Feast of the Victorious Cross,” *Hugoye* 23 (2020): 3–30. Among the more than eighty extant *mēmṛē* attributed to Narsai some are probably not authentic: *Mēmṛā* 43 ‘On the Martyrs’, for instance, is almost certainly not by Narsai but by Jacob (ed. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* [Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910], 2.636–649). Similarly, *Mēmṛā* 30 ‘On Palm Sunday’ seems to be a later compilation

Most of the *mēm̄rē* are written in 12-syllable meter, with some in 7-syllable meter. Many, if not all, of them include biblical exegesis, and they deal with a variety of liturgical, moral, and theological topics.

The just over eighty or so *mēm̄rē* attributed to Narsai are preserved in more than two dozen manuscripts.²⁵ The oldest of these manuscripts is ms. Chaldean Patriarchate 71, which dates sometime between 1188 and 1288.²⁶ It is followed chronologically by two manuscripts from the Chaldean collection formerly in Diyarbakır but now in Mardin: ms. Diyarbakır 70 (1328) and ms. Diyarbakır 71 (14th–16th cent.).²⁷ There is then one manuscript dated to 1647: ms. Baghdad, Archbishopric of the Church of the East 45.²⁸ Another stems from 1705: ms. Chaldean Patriarchate 72.²⁹ The remainder of the manuscripts all date from the

and rewriting based on Narsai's *Mēm̄rā* 29 'On Palm Sunday' and Jacob's *Mēm̄rā* 'On Palm Sunday' (ed. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 5.613–631) (see J. Frishman, "Narsai's Homily for the Palm Festival – Against the Jews: For the Palm Festival or against the Jews?," in *SymSyr* IV, 221). Finally, *Mēm̄rā* 35 'On the Mysteries' is almost certainly not by Narsai, departing in various ways from the authentic corpus, in content as well as in language and style (see Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.12–14; L. Abramowski, "Die liturgische Homilie des Ps. Narses mit dem Messbekenntnis und einem Theodor-Zitat," *BJRULM* 78 [1996]: 87–100; S. P. Brock, "Greek Words in Ephrem and Narsai: A Comparative Sampling," *ARAM* 12 [2000]: 327–328; idem, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies," 39 fn. 42). For further discussion about these and possibly other spurious attributions to Narsai, see Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, 3.11–15. In addition, a series of four *mēm̄rē* on Joseph are attributed to Narsai in some manuscripts as well as to Jacob of Serugh in others (ed. P. Bedjan, *Liber superiorum, seu Historia Monastica, auctore Thoma, Episcopo Margensi. Liber Fundatorum Monasteriorum in regno Persarum et Arabum. Homiliae Mar-Narsetis in Joseph. Documenta Patrum de quibusdam verae fidei dogmatibus* [Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1901], 519–629). Heal has definitively shown that neither attribution is correct (K. S. Heal, *Tradition and Transformation: Genesis 37 and 39 in Early Syriac Sources* [Ph.D. Diss., University of Birmingham, 2008], 33–68). In addition to *mēm̄rē*, a number of *soḡyātā* are attributed to Narsai (ten are edited in A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* [Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905], 2.366–411; see also F. Feldmann, *Syrische Wechsellieder von Narses: Ein Beitrag zur altchristlichen syrischen Hymnologie, nach einer Handschrift der Königlichen Bibliothek in Berlin* [Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1896]). These are, however, all likely spurious.

²⁵ See the still indispensable listing in W. F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 39 (1973): 275–306.

²⁶ For this manuscript, see Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 280–281; A. Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du Patriarcat chaldéen de Mossoul," *Revue des Bibliothèques* 17 (1907): 245.

²⁷ For these two manuscripts, see Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 281–282; A. Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché chaldéen de Diarbékir," *JA* 10.1 (1907): 361–362 and 365–366. Images of both of these manuscripts are available from the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library under the shelf-marks CCM 578 and CCM 397, respectively.

²⁸ This manuscript was unknown to Macomber. For description, see Heal, *Tradition and Transformation*, 43–47.

²⁹ For this manuscript, see Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 283; Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du Patriarcat chaldéen de Mossoul," 245. Images of this manuscript are also available from the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, under the shelf-mark CPB 105.

late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, but are nonetheless still valuable for the textual and transmission history of Narsai.³⁰

In 1905, Alphonse Mingana published a collection (not critically edited) of forty-seven *mēm̄rē* attributed to Narsai.³¹ In 1970, a facsimile edition of a relatively recent manuscript (dated to 1901) containing seventy-two *mēm̄rē* was published by the Patriarchal Press.³² Together, Mingana's and the Patriarchal Press's publications make available many of Narsai's extant *mēm̄rē* but not all of them, and none critically edited.³³ Several *mēm̄rē* have been published separately in critical editions (of varying quality).³⁴ But, most *mēm̄rē* await proper critical editions, and several lack any edition at all.³⁵ In addition, the majority of *mēm̄rē* have never been translated into a Western language.³⁶

³⁰ See A. M. Butts, "A Misapplication of *eliminatio codicum descriptorum* in the Manuscript Tradition of Narsai (d. ca. 500)," *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin* 5.2 (2019): 77–100. By 'textual and transmission history', I refer to G. Pasquali, *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo* (2nd ed.; Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1952).

³¹ Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina*.

³² Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, *Homilies of Mar Narsai* (San Francisco: Patriarchal Press, 1970).

³³ An immensely useful set of indices between these two publications is available in Brock, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies."

³⁴ In chronological order: Martin, "Homélie de Narsès sur les trois docteurs nestoriens"; Gignoux, *Homélie de Narsai sur la création*; McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension*; E. P. Siman, *Narsai. Cinq homélie sur les paraboles évangéliques* (Paris: Cariscript, 1984); Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy*, parts 1 and 2.

³⁵ Belonging to the latter category are *Mēm̄rā* 17 'For Any Saints Day'; *Mēm̄rā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (though an edition is in preparation by Erin Galgay Walsh); *Memrā* 51 'On the Antichrist'.

³⁶ For published translations, see Brock, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies." To help fill this lacuna in the scholarly literature, the three editors of the present volume direct an ambitious project to translate all the extant *mēm̄rē* of Narsai into English. The *mēm̄rē* are being translated by an international team of almost three dozen scholars.

Exegesis, Askesis, and Identity

Narsai's *Mēmṛā* on the Parable of the Ten Virgins

Daniel Becerra

The study of Narsai's homiletical exegesis over the past several decades has tended to focus predominantly on three interrelated matters of inquiry: 1) Narsai's understanding of a particular passage, theme, or figure in scripture,¹ 2) Narsai's exposition of specific theological concepts and concerns,² and 3) Narsai's interpretive method and its relation to that of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors.³ To date, however, few studies have adequately accounted for a

¹ See, for example, A. H. Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination' of the Jews: The Syriac Yatsra in Narsai's Metrical Homilies for Lent," *JQR* 106 (2016): 179–207; K. Heal, *Tradition and Transformation: Genesis 37 and 39 in Early Syriac Sources* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Birmingham, 2008); R. Kitchen, "Winking at Jonah: Narsai's Interpretation of Jonah for the Church of the East," in V. Hovhannessian (ed.), *The Old Testament as Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East* (BCOT 1; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 51–56; P. Komban, "Second Reading about Joseph by Narsai," in P. Kochappilly (ed.), *The Folly of the Cross: Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Varghese Pathikulangara, CMI* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications/Kottayam: Denha, 2000), 313–324; C. Payngot, "The Homily of Narsai on the Virgin Mary," *Harp* 13 (2000): 33–37.

² See, for example, I. Arickappallil, "The Folly of the Cross and the Glory of Resurrection in Mar Narsai," in *Folly of the Cross*, 18–30; idem, "Die nachephesinische Christologie der edessenischen Theodorianer," in L. Greisiger, C. Rammelt, and J. Tubach (eds.), *Edessa in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit: Religion, Kultur und Politik zwischen Ost und West. Beiträge des internationalen Edessa-Symposiums in Halle an der Saale, 14.–17. Juli 2005* (BTS 116; Beirut: Orient-Institut/Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2009), 1–9; idem, *The Holy Spirit in Narsai of Nisibis: A Theological Synthesis* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1992); T. Kuzhuppil, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah: A Theological Study of Narsai's Interpretation of Isaiah 6* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2006); J. Frishman, "Narsai's Christology according to his Homily 'On the Word became Flesh,'" *Harp* 8/9 (1995/96): 289–303; F. G. McLeod, "Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai," *TS* 42 (1981): 458–468; A. Satyaputra, "Reexamining Narsai's Christology: On the Two Natures of Christ," *STJ* 6 (1998): 23–32.

³ See, for example, L. Abramowski, "Narsai, Ephrām und Kyrill über Jesu Verlassenheitsrurf Matth. 27,46," in H.-J. Feulner, E. Velkovska, and R. F. Taft (eds.), *Crossroad of Cultures: Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler* (OCA 260; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2000), 43–67; J. Frishman, "Type and Reality in the Exegetical Homilies of Mar Narsai," *SP* 20 (1989): 169–175; E. Matthews, Jr., "What Manner of Man?: Early Syriac Reflections on Adam," in R. Miller (ed.), *Syriac and Antiochian Exegesis and Biblical Theology for the 3rd Millennium* (GECS 6; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008), 115–149; F. G. McLeod, "Narsai's Dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia," *JCSSS* 7 (2007): 18–38; T. Jansma, "Narsai's dubbele erfenis. Enkele opmerkingen over de invloed van Theodorus van Mopsueste en van

significant element of Narsai's exegetical endeavors within the homiletical context – the assumption that scriptural exegesis was not an end in itself but a tool for facilitating the spiritual development of an audience. As Kristian Heal has insightfully observed, “Narsai had a very clear objective for his audience, and indeed for himself; namely to become like the very scriptural figures whose lives were so often the focus of his homilies ... He repeatedly called people ... to measure their lives against the biblical saints, and change accordingly.”⁴

The present article attends to this lacuna in scholarship by looking beyond what Narsai intended his homilies to say and instead examining what he might have envisioned them to do.⁵ Limiting my analysis to *Mēmra* 27 ‘*On the Parable of the Ten Virgins*,’⁶ my approach is informed by the work of several scholars – notably C. M. Chin, Paul Kolbet, David Brakke, and Peter Martens – who have sought to illuminate the relationship of exegesis and the formation of ascetic subjects in late ancient Christianity more broadly. Departing from more traditional approaches to studying biblical interpretation, which typically focus on the methods and products of exegesis, as well on their utility for negotiating cultural discourses, these scholars have turned their attention to the correlation between the interpretive act and the intellectual, spiritual, and moral formation of Christian readers and listeners, particularly within communal contexts.⁷ Accordingly,

Efraïm de Syriër,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* NS 51 (1970–1971): 1–15; L. Van Rompay, “Humanity's Sin in Paradise: Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai in Conversation,” in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Serugh and His Times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (GECS 8; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 199–217; F. Thome, “Jona – Typus Christi. Narsais Memra über Jona im Lichte der Exegese Theodors von Mopsuestia zum Jonabuch,” in D. Bumazhnov, E. Grypeou, T. Sailors, and A. Toepel (eds.), *Bibel, Byzanz und Christlicher Orient: Festschrift für Stephen Gerö zum 65. Geburtstag* (OLA 187; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 363–386; G. Vavanikunnel (ed.), *Homilies and Interpretation of Holy Qurbana, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Narsai and Gabriel Qatraya Bar Lipah* (Sandesanilayam: Changanacherry Publications, 1977).

⁴ Kristian Heal, “Narsai and the Scriptural Self” in this volume (pp. 133–143).

⁵ I am indebted to Chin for this phrasing. See C. Chin, “‘Who is the Ascetic Exegete?’ Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua*,” in H.-U. Weidemann (ed.), *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: Reception and Use of New Testament Texts in Ancient Christian Ascetic Discourses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 208.

⁶ Ed. Mingana 1.243–56 and Siman 6–22. I follow the former in this article but preserve the paragraphs and numbering of Siman's edition for convenience and in conformity with recent scholarship. Nin provides a brief introduction to the work in M. Nin, “Lomelia sulle dieci vergini (Mt 25,1–13) di Narsai di Edessa,” in E. Vergani and S. Chialà (eds.), *Storia, cristologia e tradizioni della Chiesa Siro-orientale. Atti del 3° Incontro sull'Oriente Cristiano di tradizione siriana: Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 14 maggio 2004* (Ecumenismo e dialogo; Milan: Centro Ambrosiano, 2006), 115–129.

⁷ D. Brakke, “Reading the New Testament and Transforming the Self in Evagrius of Pontus,” in Weidemann (ed.), *Asceticism and Exegesis*, 284–299; Chin, “Who is the Ascetic Exegete,” 203–218; S. Davis, *Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); P. Dilley, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 122–147; S. A. Harvey, “Liturgy and Ethics in Ancient Syriac Christianity: Two Paradigms,” *SCE* 26 (2013): 300–316; D. Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian*

the salient issues which occupy these scholars' analyses, and which also govern the current study, include: the intended psychological *telos* of the scriptural encounter; the rhetorical and ascetical strategies employed by readers and listeners to facilitate the realization of this *telos*; and the assumptions regarding agency and personhood – particularly as they relate to collaboration and collectivity – understood to inform this process.

Building upon this investigative foundation, the current study examines the confluence of exegesis, *askesis*, and identity as it is represented in *Mēmṛā* 27. I employ the term *askesis* and its derivatives to refer broadly to those practices understood by Narsai to facilitate the transformation of the self into a more ideal state of being, irrespective of the taxonomic designation (e.g., monk, virgin, etc.) of the individual who engages in them. Within Narsai's corpus, this transformation, which begins in the present and mirrors the eschaton, variously entails regaining the image of God, cultivating the spiritual senses, detachment from earthly concerns and desires, practicing virtue, and bridling the passions.⁸ Additionally, as Robert Kitchen has demonstrated, Narsai speaks of ascetic practice as integral to an ideal "way of life (*dubbārē*)," which is imitative of biblical figures and adopted by aspiring persons who are anxious for their spiritual welfare.⁹

After providing a brief overview of the *mēmṛā* itself, my argument proceeds in three parts. Part one addresses Narsai's introduction to the parable, his petition that the Holy Spirit accompany him in the interpretative act, and the potential rhetorical force of this passage for his listeners. Part two examines Narsai's expectations of his audience's involvement in the exegetical process as well as his psychagogic use of rhetoric throughout the work.¹⁰ Part three suggests what this

Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); P. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2010); P. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); B. Matz, "Ascetic Readings of the Agricultural Parables in Matt 13:1–48 in the Cappadocians," in Weidemann (ed.), *Asceticism and Exegesis*, 268–283; D.A. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); B. Stefaniw, *Mind, Text, and Commentary: Noetic Exegesis in Origen of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind, and Evagrius Ponticus* (ECCA 6; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

⁸ Heal provides a catalogue of virtues commonly lauded by Narsai, including purity, serenity, chastity, modesty, righteousness, and constancy. See "Narsai and the Scriptural Self" in this volume (pp. 136–137). See also Narsai's discussion of the ascetic life in *Mēmṛā* 19 'On Works', 137–144; 167–170; 501–512 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.601–603, 616–617).

⁹ R. Kitchen, "The Ascetic Narsai: Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the *Mēmṛē* of Narsai" in this volume (pp. 145–159, esp. 148–150).

¹⁰ The term "psychagogy" has been used in recent scholarship to refer broadly to the practice of spiritual guidance, particularly in classical philosophical traditions and in early Christianity. See I. Hadot, "The Spiritual Guide," in A. H. Armstrong, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, and Roman* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 455; P. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 1–16; A. Malherbe, "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.26.1 (1991): 267–333; P. Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Kosel-Verlag, 1954), 17.

participation was intended to accomplish in his audience's souls. I will argue that Narsai's audience's engagement with the scriptural text is framed as an act of cognitive *askesis*, which anticipated an other-centered ethical response and conception of personhood.

Overview of *Mēmṛā* 27

Narsai's *mēmṛā* on the ten virgins provides an extended interpretation of Mt 25:1–13. Delivered on the sixth and last Sunday of Lent, it consists of two-hundred and nine lines of text composed in dodecasyllabic meter.¹¹ In the parable, ten virgins await the coming of the bridegroom, but only the five wise ones are prepared when he eventually arrives. It is these who are permitted to enter the wedding feast. While it has been suggested that nothing can be known of the primary audience of this work,¹² there is internal evidence to suggest that Narsai's original addressees may have included ascetically-minded individuals who were primarily, if not exclusively, male. This may be surmised by the fact that Narsai dedicates several lines of the *mēmṛā* to explaining why females were chosen as the protagonists in the parable and how they may be understood as representative of males in reality,¹³ that he directly addresses his audience at the conclusion of the *mēmṛā* by the title "virgins,"¹⁴ and that he describes the wise and foolish virgins in the parable as a symbol of "our way of life" (*dubbār hayyayn*).¹⁵

Nevertheless, it is difficult to differentiate with any precision between Narsai's figurative use of the term "virgin" and its employment as a referent to his audience's actual lifestyle. In other words, when Narsai labels his audience "virgins," it is not clear whether he is making a statement about their sexuality or merely rhetorically equating them to their literary counterparts in service of his exegetical and pastoral goals. Elsewhere, for instance, he refers to his audience as "Guests of the Bridegroom," and likely not because they were going to attend a wedding.¹⁶ Accordingly, while Narsai certainly extols the virginal life,¹⁷ it is

¹¹ Becker, "The 'Evil Inclination,'" 195.

¹² Nin, "L'omelia," 117.

¹³ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 60–67 (ed. Siman). As Becker has noted: "That the virgins are women in the parable is in order to show that not only men but women too can live in purity, an instance of a *minori ad maius* logic, the less likely category marking greater inclusivity." ("The 'Evil Inclination,'" 195).

¹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 206 (ed. Siman). Narsai also refers to his audience by the following titles: "You who approach, who desire the Kingdom"; "wise"; "You who love contemplation, and search out hidden mysteries"; "You who expound the meaning of allegories to pupils"; "Guests of the Bridegroom"; and "You who await the promise of the Kingdom." See Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 204–209 (ed. Siman).

¹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 70 (ed. Siman).

¹⁶ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 209 (ed. Siman).

¹⁷ Narsai uses the ten virgins as exempla in his praise of sexual continence, saying that their

arguably the division of the ten virgins into the “wise” and “foolish” – and not their sexual continence – that he considers evocative of his audience’s actual circumstances.¹⁸ This is merely to say that any determination as to the ascetical status (*viz.* sexuality) of Narsai’s primary audience must be tentative.

Broadly speaking, Narsai interprets the parable in a manner consistent with other exegetes in the late ancient Syriac tradition, in particular Ephrem and Aphrahat.¹⁹ Hence, the ten wise and foolish virgins are viewed respectively as individuals who are worthy and unworthy of eschatological rewards in heaven. Narsai departs from these other authors, however, in his emphasis on the oil in the wise virgins’ lamps, which he equates to love and mercy. The prominence of this symbol throughout the *mēmṛā* makes these two relational virtues the focal point of the parable, and thus, as I hope to demonstrate, central to the aspirations and disposition of the religious subjects he intends to emerge as a result of the exegetical event.²⁰

With regard to its structure, the *mēmṛā* may be divided into five sections. The introductory section (lines 1–13) comprises Narsai’s encomium to scripture and his invocation of the Holy Spirit. Section two (lines 14–26) provides a brief paraphrase of Mt 25:1–13. Section three (lines 27–52) contains a litany of rhetorical questions, some of which Narsai will subsequently address in the *mēmṛā*. Section four (lines 53–203), which constitutes the majority of the work, encompasses the parable interpretation proper. And section five (lines 204–209), the *peroratio*, records Narsai’s final exhortations to his audience.

virginity demonstrates that one must “seek freedom from its (*viz.* marriage’s) responsibilities” and that men and women “can live as companions in purity.” See *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 63, 65 (ed. Siman). For the use of female exempla elsewhere in Narsai’s corpus, see E. Walsh, “Audacious Women: Eve and the Canaanite Woman in Narsai’s Poetry” (pp. 199–226) and Heal, “Narsai and the Scriptural Self” (pp. 141–143) in this volume.

¹⁸ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 70 (ed. Siman). The full line reads: “He divided our way of life into two categories, and He named the one wise, and the other, foolish.”

¹⁹ K. Valavanolickal, *The Use of the Gospel Parables in the Writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem* (Studies in the Religion and History of Early Christianity 2; New York: P. Lang, 1996), 177–198. For additional works on the interpretation of parables in the Syriac tradition, see T. Baarda, “Philoxenus and the Parable of the Fisherman: Concerning the Diatessaron Text of Mt 13,47–50,” in F. van Segbroeck et al. (eds.), *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (BETL 100.2; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 1403–1423; H. Kruse, “The Return of the Prodigal: Fortunes of a Parable on its Way to the Far East,” *Orientalia* 47 (1978): 163–214; P.-H. Poirier and E. Crégheur, “La parabole de l’ivraie (Matthieu 13,24–30.36–43) dans le Livre des lois des pays,” in A. Frey and R. Gounelle (eds.), *Poussières de christianisme et de judaïsme antiques: Études réunies en l’honneur de Jean-Daniel Kaestli et Éric Junod* (Publications de l’Institut romand des sciences bibliques 5; Lausanne: Zèbre, 2007), 297–305; K. Valavanolickal, “The Use of the Gospel Parables in Ephrem,” *ETJ* 1 (1997): 17–26; idem, “The Exegesis of Aphrahat and Ephrem with Special Reference to the Gospel Parables,” *The Harp* 13 (2000): 99–107; A. van Lantschoot, “Deux paraboles syriaques (Roman de Barlaam et Josaphat),” *Le Muséon* 79 (1966): 133–154.

²⁰ Another prominent theme in this *mēmṛā* is freewill (*hērūtā*).

Achieving the Aim of the *Mēmṛā*

Narsai's principal goal in the *mēmṛā* is to engender a sense of collective identity in his audience characterized by the virtues of love and mercy. In order to accomplish this goal, he employs common rhetorical strategies intended to persuade his listeners to a certain course of life, frequently through the praise of virtue and censure of vice.²¹ He also invites both the Holy Spirit and his listeners to act as participants in the exegetical process with the expectation that doing so will promote a metamorphosis of the individual dispositions and self-understanding of his audience members.

Exordium and Invocation of the Spirit

Narsai begins the *mēmṛā* with an exordium in which he praises scripture for its potential to enrich and illuminate the souls of those who engage with it.²² As Manel Nin has argued, Narsai's purpose in this is to entice his listeners to attentiveness through the promise of spiritual rewards, as well as to instill in them a sense of goodwill and trust.²³ Narsai writes:

It is good to study the words of the Spirit in scripture;
 Intimacy with scripture is precious to those who ponder it.
 Beautiful is the doctrine of the gospel of the heavenly kingdom;
 Its love distributes great blessings to the one who delights in it.
 A great treasure is hidden in the letters of its words;
 The one who reads with a loving soul abounds eternally.
 The verses of scriptures are like rays of light;
 The one who gazes (at them) without doubting sees all things.
 Like a teacher, its message passes before the mind;
 And the one who desires the companionship of its affection draws near to heaven.

²¹ McVey has convincingly demonstrated that Narsai was familiar with Greco-Roman rhetoric. See K. McVey, "The *Mēmṛā* of Narsai on the Three Nestorian Doctors as an Example of Forensic Rhetoric," in *SymSyr* III, 87–96. For an in depth study on the history and function of epideictic rhetoric in Greco-Roman antiquity, see L. Pernot, *Epideictic Rhetoric: Questioning the Stakes of Ancient Praise* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). For a brief treatment of Syriac rhetorical theory more generally, see, J. Watt, "Syriac Rhetorical Theory and the Syriac Tradition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*," in W. Fortenbaugh and D. Mirhady (eds.), *Peripatetic Rhetoric After Aristotle* (Rutgers University Studies in Classical Humanities 6; New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 1994), 243–260. For the use of rhetoric within the context of ascetic life, see Dilley, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls*, 124–139.

²² For a brief introduction to the traditional use of the exordium, see F.P. Donnelly, "A Function of the Classical Exordium," *CW* 5.26 (1912): 204–207. See also Hermogenes, *On Invention*, 1.1–5 (ed. and trans. G. Kennedy, *Invention and Method: Two Rhetorical Treatises from the Hermogenic Corpus* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005], 3–29).

²³ Nin, "L'omelia," 120. The technical rhetorical term for what Narsai does here is *captatio benevolentiae*.

Lovingly, it beckons people to it;
Tenderly, it fills the one who approaches with its love.²⁴

In this passage, as is common in Christian protreptic and paraenetic rhetoric,²⁵ Narsai describes the value of scripture primarily with respect to its psychagogic potential. Scripture is precious and beautiful because it expands the soul's faculties and draws it to heaven. It likewise contains hidden treasure, which, if found, enables the soul to abound eternally. Narsai also provides keys whereby his audience may unlock scripture's "power" to profit their souls, saying that the text benefits those who approach it "without doubting," with a "loving soul," and with desire for "the companionship of its affection."²⁶ Accordingly, at the very outset, Narsai establishes both the value of scripture in facilitating spiritual development and the means by which his listeners may productively engage with the text to this end.

Following this introductory encomium to scripture, Narsai links scripture's transformative power to its relationship with the divine, describing it as the "living mouth" by which God speaks, teaches, and calls humankind to himself.²⁷ Invoking the metaphor of the master-disciple relationship, he then, in a sudden apostrophe,²⁸ petitions the Holy Spirit to accompany him as he begins his exegetical work:

I saw that the instruction of the skilled master was great knowledge;
And my mind counseled me to become his disciple if he would accept me.
Accept me, Master, you who make people wise with his instruction;
Employ my tongue to study the reading of your words.
My mouth longs to be made a disciple of your utterances;
Write me a verse that I may read it.²⁹

Narsai's language here is significant because it elucidates his expectation that to interpret scripture is to be acted upon, or co-opted, as it were, by spiritual

²⁴ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 1–6 (ed. Siman).

²⁵ For a detailed study on the rhetoric of moral exhortation, see J.M. Starr and T. Engberg-Pedersen (eds.), *Early Christian Paraenesis in Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004).

²⁶ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 2–5, 13 (ed. Siman). See also *Mēmṛā 48 'On the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus'*, 241 (ed. Siman). Aphrahat seems to hold similar assumptions regarding the relation of virtue and epistemology. See J. Childers, "Humility Begets Wisdom and Discernment: Character and True Knowing in Aphrahat," *SP* 41 (2006): 13–21 and idem, "Virtuous Reading: Aphrahat's Approach to Scripture," in G.A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock* (GECS 3; Piscataway: Gorgias, 2008), 43–70.

²⁷ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 4–5, 6, 27 (ed. Siman).

²⁸ An "apostrophe" is a sudden turn from the general audience to address a specific group or individual, in this case, the Holy Spirit. See R. D. Anderson, *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation, Figures and Tropes From Anaximenes to Quintillian* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 25.

²⁹ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 8–10 (ed. Siman).

forces. This collaborative relationship appears to involve more than just working together in the traditional sense but rather implies the shifting and blurring of boundaries between human and divine persons and their roles. The language of orality – i. e., the notion that scripture is God’s mouth and that the Spirit will speak through Narsai’s mouth – dissolves the line between homilist and the Spirit such that it is no longer clear who precisely is speaking and interpreting the words of scripture.³⁰ Thus, as Narsai envisions it, the act of homiletical exegesis implies a divine-human inter-relationality, according to which the homilist is not uniquely himself.

Audience Participation

Narsai and the Spirit, however, are not the only operative agents in the homiletical event. In addition to providing the initial keys for a spiritually productive scriptural encounter, Narsai also deliberately invites his listeners to be active participants in the exegetical process. He does this consistently throughout the *mēmṛā* in at least three ways. First, his use of plural hortatory verb forms and frequent employment of the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our” reflect his expectation of intellectual labor and attentiveness on the part of his listeners. For instance, he writes, “Let us approach it (scripture) and inquire into what is hidden in its verses”;³¹ “Let us start our inquiry”;³² “Let us look into how it is written”; and “We must examine.”³³ He also commands his audience explicitly: “Come, observers, look closely at the word of our Lord.”³⁴

Second, Narsai poses over thirty rhetorical questions to his audience intended to stimulate and direct their thinking relative to the meaning of the passage and its relevance to their current circumstances.³⁵ This litany of questions – the technical rhetorical term for them being *interrogatio* (Latin) or ἐρώτημα (Greek) – includes:³⁶ “Why does he give up the theme of men to portray women?” “If they all lived a virginal life, why was there a distinction between the wise and the foolish?” and “Why did the Bridegroom not wait so they could

³⁰ For other examples of the blurring of Narsai’s voice and that of deity, see Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 19 ‘On Works’, 13–14 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.596) and *Mēmṛā* 69 ‘On Job’, 1–2 (ed. Mingana 2.254)

³¹ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 27 (ed. Siman).

³² *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 49 (ed. Siman).

³³ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 50, 57 (ed. Siman). For examples of this in other *mēmṛē*, see *Mēmṛā* 33 ‘On the Parable of the Prodigal Son’, 154–155 (ed. Siman); *Mēmṛā* 47 ‘On the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard’, 56 (ed. Siman).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 58 (ed. Siman); *Mēmṛā* 48 ‘On the Rich Man and Lazarus’, 204–206 (ed. Siman).

³⁵ For another example of this, see *Mēmṛā* 48 ‘On the Rich Man and Lazarus’, 91–96 (ed. Siman).

³⁶ See also ἐπερώτησις and πύσμα in Anderson, *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms*, 51–52, 108.

all enter together?”³⁷ The strategic position of these questions in the *mēmṛā*, following his paraphrase of the parable but preceding his exposition of it, provides Narsai with roughly two and half minutes to arouse and capture his listeners’ minds, making them aware of the difficulties and possibilities they are to encounter in the text.³⁸

Finally, Narsai invites his audience to enter into the pages of scripture, which is to say, to interpret the figures and events of the parable not only as a mirror to the present state of their souls but as an indication of its possible future.³⁹ As Adam Becker has observed, the notion that scripture reflects reality and provides an “aspirational vision” of what humanity may achieve is a common theme in Narsai’s *mēmṛē*.⁴⁰ It likewise betrays the fact that Narsai understood the scriptural encounter as anticipatory of self-transformation, as a tool for discerning and actualizing human spiritual potential. Elsewhere in his corpus, Narsai claims that scriptural parables (*pellē[/]tā*) have an inherent power of drawing the reader into the text and thereby to God.⁴¹ Employing an optical metaphor, he describes God as painter and scripture as his painting, a representation of reality which enables its viewer to discern things past, present, and future, things earthly and divine, visible and invisible.⁴² Accordingly, through close examination of scripture, individuals “learn to cast their eyes upward, and ... gaze upon the beauty of its (*viz.* the kingdom’s) secrets.”⁴³ Narsai argues that God chose the symbols of the parable of the ten virgins in order that “it would be easy for us to assess the quality of each of our attributes. He reveals our virtues and our vices through his parables; and he painted and showed us the blessings and punishments that await us.”⁴⁴ Consequently, when Narsai states that God has “divided the manner of our way of life into two categories” and that the bride-

³⁷ See *Mēmṛā 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’*, 28–49 (ed. Siman) for addition examples.

³⁸ It takes roughly 300 seconds to read at a steady pace all of the questions Narsai poses.

³⁹ For additional examples of Narsai’s use of mirror imagery, see *Mēmṛā 69 ‘On Job’*, 15, 353, 367 (ed. Mingana 2.255, 264). See also Heal, “Narsai and the Scriptural Self” in this volume (pp. 140–142).

⁴⁰ Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination,’” 185.

⁴¹ In *Mēmṛā 48 ‘On the Rich Man and Lazarus’*, 100 (ed. Siman), Narsai says: “It is for teaching humans that the Author wrote various symbols, in order to draw humanity to his doctrine through them.” In *Mēmṛā 47 ‘On the Workers in the Vineyard’*, 26–28 (ed. Siman), he writes: “With parables, He pursued us like a hunter would a bird, and He gathered us and ensnared us in the words of his Gospel. He cast before our spirits the bait of these words, and He lured us to the food by enticing us like a bird. He laid a snare of parables for our hearts, which love to sin, so that they selfishly sin no longer.”

⁴² *Mēmṛā 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’*, 77–83 (ed. Siman). For Narsai’s use of similar metaphors, see Eva Rodrigo Gómez, “Painting Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Narsai” in this volume (pp. 187–197).

⁴³ *Mēmṛā 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’*, 56–61 (ed. Siman).

⁴⁴ *Mēmṛā 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’*, 68–69 (ed. Siman). See also ln. 85: “In the number ten, he assembled all the categories of humans.”

groom is “engaged to us,” he expects his listeners to reflect on whether they are numbered among the five wise or five foolish virgins.⁴⁵

Itinerary of the Soul

Encouraging his listeners to find their literary counterparts provides Narsai’s audience with an opportunity to be introspective about the state of their souls. He describes the five wise virgins as loving, merciful, righteous, meek, perfect, and as having a pure and free soul, whereas the foolish are portrayed as wicked and engaging in works devoid of love and mercy.⁴⁶ Once Narsai’s audience members have aligned themselves with either the wise or foolish virgins, he proceeds to guide them through the events of the parable in the apparent expectation that this journey will elicit a series of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that will ultimately contribute to the formation of their souls. He understands his listeners’ involvement in this exegetical process as a form of cognitive *askesis*, or to use his own terminology, as acts of contemplation (*hergā*), searching (*b’ātā*), investigation (*beqyā*), and examination (*hāwrā*) which will incite them to, “work hard,” “press forward,” “cultivate a purity of soul without disdain,” and to see themselves as one body.⁴⁷

Narsai’s consistent deployment of encomion and invective throughout the *mēmṛā* provides his listeners with occasions to experience for themselves the praise and blame levied at their literary counterparts, as well as to contemplate the implications of these judgements for their own standing before God. His rhetoric, therefore, affords his audience a kind of experiential itinerary for the soul, predicated upon the melding of real and literary selves through cognitive ascetical labor. Thus, in the same way that boundaries between Narsai and the Spirit blur within the context of the exegetical event, so do the boundaries of his audience and the characters of scripture. As Heal has noted, Narsai frequently employs language of shared itinerancy in his *mēmṛē*, encouraging his listeners to “set out” (*hzaq*) with, “go out” (*nḥaq*) with, and travel in the company of the biblical saints.⁴⁸ I submit, however, that this language should not be understood exclusively as an invitation to *mimesis* in daily life but rather also implies the ex-

⁴⁵ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 69–70; 89, 170 (ed. Siman).

⁴⁶ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 96, 101, 135, 170–171, 183 (ed. Siman).

⁴⁷ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 1, 13, 27, 57; 127, 131–133; 191–203; 207 (ed. Siman); cf. *Mēmṛā* 33 ‘On the Prodigal Son’, 154–155 (ed. Siman); *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘On Joseph’, 802 (ed. Mingana 2.288).

⁴⁸ Heal writes: “In the mind ... or in the imagination, one could view the way of life of the just ones, and journey with them. The principal objective of Narsai’s *mēmṛā* ... is to take his congregation on this very journey.” Heal is referring specifically to Narsai’s *mēmṛē* on Joseph and Job, but this statement may also be applied to his *mēmṛā* on the ten virgins. See Heal, “Narsai and the Scriptural Self” in this volume (p. 135).

pectation of a shared pathos between exegetes and scriptural characters within the homiletical context itself.

For those of Narsai's audience who may identify with the five foolish virgins, their itinerary through the parable involves fear, a tortured conscience, reprimand, condemnation, and it should kindle in them a desire to correct their ways. Hearing the words of the bridegroom as if spoken to them, they are to experience "fear of grievous news" as they learn that "every loveless way of life is despicable."⁴⁹ Narsai is adamant that what matters most to God are the intentions and disposition that inform works and not the works themselves, saying that God, by "denouncing their (*viz.* the foolish ones) thoughts, cut down their deeds," and that works without mercy and love are rendered "impotent in the day of recompense."⁵⁰ This suggests that the response that Narsai aims to elicit in his audience is not just behavioral but psychological. He wants to shape the internal motivational apparatus that informs conduct: the thoughts and desires of his listeners.

Narsai also intends for those lacking love and mercy to reflect at length on the shame they will feel in the resurrection, when all of their sins will be uncovered and reflected in the appearance of their bodies. Employing evocative imagery of light, darkness, glory, shame, happiness, and torment, he writes:

Light and darkness will manifest to all;
 The works in which one engaged in this life.
 The sight of the body will be a testimony against the spirit;
 And will be an embarrassment to the one who acted disingenuously.
 From the body glory and shame will emanate;
 And for each person it will distribute blessings and assign punishments.
 A person will punish himself by the sins he committed;
 And his mind, like a judge, will rebuke his depravity.
 Every person will see his own faults and those of his companions;
 And no-one will be hidden, not from himself, and not from his neighbors.⁵¹

Narsai's vivid description of the resurrection here and throughout the *mēmṛā* is designed to instill a sense of urgency in his listeners, a fear to procrastinate their repentance. He emphasizes that the wise virgins did not sell any of their oil to the foolish because they could not, for merchandise "may be sold in this world of toil, but in the world to come, buying and selling will cease."⁵² He similarly stresses that mercy accrued in the eschaton is proportional to mercy extended in the present.⁵³ He accordingly dwells further on the gulf separating the wise and foolish virgins at the Day of Judgment, saying:

⁴⁹ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 134–135; 183–192 (ed. Siman).

⁵⁰ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 151, 190 (ed. Siman).

⁵¹ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 108–112 (ed. Siman).

⁵² *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 32, 173 (ed. Siman).

⁵³ *Mēmṛā* 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins', 91 (ed. Siman).

Great will be the separation between them there;
 The distance between the heights and the depths will be immeasurable.
 The heights of the righteous surpass and are more exalted than every summit;
 The depths of the wicked are more profound than every abyss.
 The appearance of the friends of love is more exquisite than any other beauty;
 The form of the deceivers is more unseemly than any disfigurement.
 Nothing is like the glory of the children of light;
 Neither is anything so repulsive as the sons of hell.⁵⁴

Narsai's use of contrastive imagery bids his listeners to be introspective about the trajectory of their souls, whether they are destined for heights or depths, beauty or ugliness, glory or hell. He later states more explicitly his goal in employing these rhetorical strategies, saying: "Come hear the words spoken to the foolish; And renounce your foolishness so that you do not hear the same" and "Let us learn from them (the virgins) that which pertains to conduct in the present life."⁵⁵

For those of Narsai's audience who see themselves in the five wise virgins, their journey through the parable is more enjoyable but not without rest-stops for reflecting on the degree to which they truly possess the attributes of their assumed literary counterparts. On the one hand, they are expected to experience encouragement, hope, joy, and a sense of divine approval as the bridegroom welcomes them into the wedding feast.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Narsai also encourages them to reflect on what they might feel upon standing at the doorway of the feast without their five companions. Equating the virgins to humankind in the eschaton, he writes:

While some will reign over all, others will be despised ...
 Who wouldn't rejoice and grieve at these two parts;
 While contemplating the blessings of the righteous and the torments of the wicked ...
 I delighted in humankind's exaltation and sorrowed in its abasement.⁵⁷

The final line, spoken in the first person in an ethopoetic fashion,⁵⁸ is a common rhetorical strategy in Narsai's works, by which he models for his audience the very thoughts and feelings he wishes them to possess – in this case, a concern

⁵⁴ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 104–105 (ed. Siman).

⁵⁵ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 206, 159 (ed. Siman).

⁵⁶ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 84, 94, 104–108, 169 (ed. Siman). Entrance to the heavenly wedding feast is a common motif in Syriac literature. See, for example, Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā 'On the Holy Fast of Forty Days'* (ed. Bedjan, 1.581, 586–587).

⁵⁷ *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 125–129 (ed. Siman).

⁵⁸ *Ethopoeia* is a rhetorical strategy whereby one puts oneself into the character of another in order to convey more vividly that person's thoughts, feelings, and disposition. For the employment of this practice elsewhere in ancient Christian ascetic literature, see E. Muehlberger, "Affecting Rhetoric: The Adoption of Ethopoeia in Evagrius of Pontus' Ascetic Program," in S. Rubenson and L. Larsen (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 182–194 and Dilley, *Monasteries and the Care of Souls*, 127–147.

for others.⁵⁹ The tendency to look beyond the self in love and compassion is precisely the reason the wise virgins are able to enter the wedding feast. As Narsai argues, the Lord “does not recognize love that lacks mercy for one’s fellows.”⁶⁰ He thus exhorts his audience to adopt an outward-oriented ethic, saying:

How abhorrent is the one who does not share his blessings with others;
 For though he possesses goods, his soul is deprived of goodness.
 Or how foolish is the one who gathers only for himself;
 For even if he obtains the entire world, he possesses nothing ...
 You seek, O man, to be righteous and good;
 Do to your neighbor what you would have them do to you.
 You desire to receive the reward of your deeds in the day of recompense;
 Pay to your fellows the debt of love, and behold, you will be rewarded.
 You long to meet the celestial Bridegroom in vestments of light;
 Let your light so shine before your neighbors, and behold you will receive him.
 You wish to enter with the wise into this felicity;
 Teach the foolish to be wise, and behold you will enter at the head of the wise.⁶¹

This other-centeredness, however, is not just a matter of ethics,⁶² but it is central to Narsai’s understanding of ideal personhood. Hence, the wedding guest he envisions cannot be conceptualized strictly with respect to the individual in isolation – confined within the boundaries of an individual body or soul. Rather, the human self possessed of love and mercy is only one point of intersection among numerous other intersecting selves, which collectively form a single self. This wedding guest, Narsai explains, “does not exist without others,” for “No one enters (the wedding feast) until he causes another to enter with him; For that is what this world demands of the one entering it. The doorman will ask the one who approaches: ‘Is there someone with you?’ He will enter if there is someone and will remain outside if there is no-one.”⁶³ Collectivity, therefore, is constitutive of personhood in the kingdom of God, or to borrow a phrase from John Zizoulas, there is no being apart from “being-in-relation.”⁶⁴

As a corollary, Narsai also makes explicit something that has informed his exposition of the parable up to this point: the notion that spiritual development is contingent upon human relationality. He begins by establishing an anthropological analogy, saying that “The soul needs the parts of the body.”⁶⁵ As Walters has observed, this claim clearly demonstrates Narsai’s dependence

⁵⁹ For other examples of this in Narsai’s homilies, see: *Mēmṛā* 48 ‘On the Rich Man and Lazarus’, 16–17, 88–90 (ed. Siman); *Mēmṛā* 33 ‘On the Prodigal Son’, 34–37, 199–205 (ed. Siman); *Mēmṛā* 47 ‘On the Workers in the Vineyard’, 64–71 (ed. Siman).

⁶⁰ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 100 (ed. Siman).

⁶¹ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 191–92, 198–201 (ed. Siman).

⁶² Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination,’” 196.

⁶³ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 193, 201–203 (ed. Siman).

⁶⁴ J. Zizoulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).

⁶⁵ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 194 (ed. Siman).

on Aristotelian anthropology, according to which the soul's potential cannot be actualized without the body.⁶⁶ This assumption in turn informs Narsai's belief that the image of God in humankind involves the corporeal as well as spiritual person.⁶⁷ Continuing the analogy, Narsai writes:

A human, therefore, has an even greater need for another human.
One accomplishes the course of righteousness with the help of others;
If a person becomes righteous without another, then he is not a human.
A human cannot be a human without other humans;
And one's godliness is not godliness without others.⁶⁸

"Righteousness" and "godliness" as Narsai employs the terms here, as well as the virtues of love and mercy, demand human relationality for their cultivation, expression, and recognition before God in the form of an eschatological reward. Accordingly, spiritual progression is portrayed within a sociocentric rather than individualistic framework,⁶⁹ occurring and finding its fulfillment within the context of personal relationships with others. Or, put another way, the means of spiritual formation resemble the ends.

Conclusion

I have framed this study as an investigation into the convergence of exegesis, *askesis*, and identity as it is represented in Narsai's *mēmṛā* on the parable of the ten virgins. I have argued that Narsai sought to engender a sense of collective identity in his audience, characterized by the virtues of love and mercy and their attendant modes of conduct. In order to accomplish this goal, Narsai invites both heavenly and earthy agents to act as participants in the exegetical process. The Holy Spirit enables Narsai to speak with the mouth of God and thereby lead the souls of his listeners to virtue and salvation. His audience's contemplative engagement with the scriptural text constituted an act of cognitive *askesis* and provided occasion for them to reflect on the current state of their souls as well as their eschatological trajectory. Moreover, by assimilating themselves to the characters of the parable, Narsai's listeners were to experience a kind of sympathy

⁶⁶ J.E. Walters, "Where Soul Meets Body: Narsai's Depiction of the Soul-Body Relationship in Context" in this volume (pp. 238–239). See also Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412a–b (ed. W.S. Hett, *On the Soul; Parva naturalia; On Breath* [rev. ed.; LCL 288; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957], 66–71).

⁶⁷ Mcleod, "Man as the Image of God," 459.

⁶⁸ *Memṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'*, 195–197 (ed. Siman).

⁶⁹ For more on sociocentric and individualistic/egocentric notions of personhood and morality, see C. Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in R. Schweder and R. Levine (eds.), *Culture Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 123–136; R.A. Schweder and E. Bourne, "Does the Concept of a Person Vary Cross-Culturally?," in *ibid.*, 158–199.

with the affective state of the virgins as Narsai narrated it to them. Thus, through the praise and censure of these women, Narsai sought to elicit in his audience an ethical response and new conception of personhood characterized by outward-orientation and other-centeredness.

Finally, there are two interrelated implications of this study which may contribute to a more robust understanding of Narsai's exegetical theory and its relation to spiritual formation. First, because a central concern of Narsai's exegetical endeavors within the homiletical context was the spiritual development of an audience, and this development was contingent upon the listener's intellectual attentiveness, the act of homiletical exegesis should not be thought of as an individual pursuit. Rather exegetical agency may be better understood as socially distributed, involving the collaboration of the homilist, Holy Spirit, and audience. Narsai's exegetical labor, therefore, may also be profitably viewed as a shared ascetic task, the efficacy of which was contingent upon its collective performance. Second, at least in the case of *Mēmra* 27, the act of interpretation foreshadows its *telos*, meaning that Narsai presents collective exegetical participation as anticipatory of the formation of a self understood in collective terms. As the shared exegetical task implies a blurring of boundaries between exegetes, spiritual forces, and literary characters, so the idealized self, intended to result from the experience, intersects with but is not confined by the traditional boundaries of individual bodies and souls.

Names in Fervent Water

Ritual and the Mediating Power of the Divine Name in Narsai's *Mēmre*

Adam H. Becker

What is the purpose of a name that cannot be heard or seen? Even more, what if that name cannot be known or comprehended by human beings and yet its existence is still posited? Such a name is always absently present in the day-to-day life of Judaism: *Barukh ata, adonai*, is how the many Jewish prayers of blessing begin. As is commonly known, the third word, *Adonai*, “our Lord,” is simply a stand-in for the name we cannot speak, the name, *ha-shem*, the ineffable inscribed by the tetragrammaton, the four consonants that make up the name of God.

In this study I would like to examine the role of the divine name in Narsai's works, in particular the function it has according to Narsai in the baptismal ritual.¹ Narsai includes in his account of the baptismal ritual a description of the officiant priest introducing the ineffable name of God, which in turn is the primary effective agent in the ritual. Narsai's dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Catechetical Homilies* in his *mēmre* on the baptismal and eucharistic rituals has long been noted.² However, one innovative feature of Narsai's explication of baptism, something absent from Theodore's work and in fact generally absent

¹ For Narsai on the baptismal ritual, see R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 8.1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909); T. Thumpeparampil, “Mar Narsai and his Liturgical Homilies on Christian Initiation,” *CO* 13 (1992): 123–134; B. D. Spinks, “The Rise and Decline of Sin and the Devil in the East Syrian Baptismal Tradition,” *SP* 26 (1993): 67–74; M. A. Kappes, “The Voice of Many Waters: The Baptismal Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis,” *SP* 33 (1997): 534–547. See also S. P. Brock, “Some Important Baptismal Themes in the Syriac Tradition,” *The Harp* 4 (1991): 189–214 and for a summary of Narsai's approach to baptism, E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 702–708. Most recently, see J. W. Childers, “In Search of Jesus: Performative Christology in Narsai's *Mēmre* on Baptism” in this volume (pp. 69–91). I would like to thank the editors of this volume for their efforts at creating a new appreciation for Narsai within the scholarly community.

² E. g., N. Witkamp, “A Critical Comparison of the So-called ‘Lawsuit’ in the Baptismal Rites of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis,” *VC* 65 (2011): 514–542. For the most recent work on Theodore's homilies, see D. L. Schwartz, *Paideia and Cult: Christian Initiation in Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013).

from the ancient understanding of baptism, is his focus on the role the divine name plays in the ritual. Understanding the place of the divine name in Narsai's treatment of baptism not only offers an entry point into his distinctive ideas about ritual and the divine name but also requires addressing other significant issues in his work, such as his thinking about materiality and epistemology.

Based upon Mt 28:19, the Trinitarian formula, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," was a significant part of the baptismal ritual for all early Christians and remains so for Christians today. Narsai interprets this phrase in a manner that opens up a space for a new operative agent within his understanding of the ritual. In fact, he seems to attempt to resolve a possible grammatical and logical ambiguity – and ultimately a potential theological contradiction – built into the Trinitarian formula itself: What is the "name" that belongs to all three of these persons of the Trinity? Are not "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit," each a name? Why is it "in the name of"? Why the use of the singular instead of the plural, that is, "in the names of"? For Narsai, behind these three names stands the ineffable name of God, and this is implicit in the Trinitarian formula itself. According to him, in the ritual declaration there is one name that oddly enough is stated inaudibly and without sound. As we will see, this name is the efficient cause in the baptismal ritual (as it is also for him in the eucharistic one). It thus takes up many of the functions often attributed to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, even more paradoxically, this name spoken without sound is understood by Narsai as inscribed: It is an inaudible oral utterance of something fundamentally written. In this article I want to get at what this might mean.

Narsai's two *mēmṛē*, 'On Baptism' and 'On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism', complement one another.³ The former is primarily concerned with the pre-baptismal anointing typical of the Syriac churches, whereas the latter focuses on the sanctification of the water and the ritual washing. The two parallel parts of the ritual correspond with one another: The oil and the water are both infused with the power of the divine name. As is common in Antiochene theology, especially in the work of Theodore of Mopsuestia and his followers, Narsai puts special emphasis on the human being's status as an "image of God," commonly derived from Gn 1:26.⁴ Narsai begins both *mēmṛē* by describing baptism as a renewal of our original "image" upon the "tablet of the waters," a touching up of this "image" that constitutes us as human beings.⁵ In the case of baptism, the

³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.356–368) and *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.341–356), respectively. English translations in Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33–45 and 46–61. Note the reversal of order of these two *mēmṛē* between Mingana and Connolly. The translations I use for these two *mēmṛē* are Connolly's with minor adjustments. All other translations are my own.

⁴ F.G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1999), 43–85.

⁵ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.356; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33) and *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.341; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 46).

officiating priest is the artisan responsible for this work, but it was the chief artist, God himself, who initially created it.

Several times in these metrical homilies Narsai describes the priest's actions and in particular his speech as an inscription by God himself, the priest serving as the pen with which he writes: "As a pen the (divine) Nod holds him spiritually, and inscribes (and) writes body and soul in the book of life."⁶ During the ritual the priest addresses the recipient while also providing the anointing, which consists of a tracing of the "image of the divine essence upon his forehead."⁷

In accord with the focus on inscription, Narsai also employs the figure of the seal or stamp, which is typical in ancient baptismal rhetoric. God "chose priests as mediators" and "to them he gave the great signet of his Divinity (*'alāhuṭēh*), that with it they might seal the work of the renovation of all."⁸ The signet ring has a seal which is used to mark ownership and Narsai borrows this language from Theodore in a way that contributes to his own distinctive focus on the divine name: "To them He gave the signet of the name of the incomprehensible Divinity (*šem 'itūṭēh dlā meṭdarkā*), that they might be stamping men with the holy Name (*bašmā dquḏšā*). The stamp of His name they lay upon His flock continually; and with the Trinity men are signing men."⁹ The signet ring marks those who are to be baptized with God's name. The language of inscription also appears in the legal terminology of the text whereby the priest is presented as an advocate for the recipients.¹⁰

It is the recitation of the Trinitarian formula in the baptismal anointing that introduces the divine name which will be inscribed onto the baptized. "The office of a mouth he fulfills¹¹ for (mental) faculties (*zaw'ē*) and (bodily) members; and on behalf of all he pronounces (*mṭargem*) the words (*qālē*) of forgiveness of iniquity. Oil and water he lays first as a foundation, and by his words he completes (and) builds the name of the Divinity (*šem 'itūṭā*)."¹² It is the priest's speech which is effective: The "keys of the words of his mouth," as Narsai puts it, open the door of the sanctuary. "The three names he casts upon the oil, and consecrates it, that it may be sanctifying the uncleanness of men by its holiness. With the name hidden in it he signs the visible body; and the sharp power of the name enters even unto the soul." As was common in the understanding of

⁶ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.359; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 36).

⁷ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.359; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 36).

⁸ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.357; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 34).

⁹ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41).

Note that Connolly capitalizes the first letter of "Divinity," which helps to mark it off as a name.

¹⁰ E.g., "To the servants of the King he gives the pen of the word of his mouth; and they write (it) down and bring him before the Judge." (*Mēmṛā* 39 [ed. Mingana 1.362–363; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 39]).

¹¹ Connolly reads *mmallē* (*mmll*) "he fulfills" instead of Mingana's *mmallel* (*mmll*) "he speaks."

¹² *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 42).

the baptismal anointing, the unction has an apotropaic function, protecting the recipient from Satan. It serves as a visual marker to ward him off: “The three names he traces upon his face as a shield; that the tyrant may see the image of the Divinity on the head of a man.”¹³ In fact, several times in the baptismal homilies Narsai emphasizes the baptismal seal’s effectiveness at protecting its recipient. “The sign (*rušmā*) of His name the demons see upon a man; and they recoil from him in whose name they see the Name of honor. The name of the Divinity (*šem ʾiṭuṭā*) looks out from the sign on the forehead; and the eyes of the crafty ones are ashamed to look upon it.”¹⁴

Many of the same ideas of *On Baptism* are repeated in *On the Mysteries of the Church and on Baptism*. As with the unction, there is a “power that is hidden in the visible waters,” and the voice of the spirit speaks through the priest.¹⁵ The recitation of the Trinitarian formula over the water impregnates it with power:

The priest is like a pen to the hidden Power; and in Its hands he writes (or, by his hand it writes) the three names over the water. O writer, that writes the Spirit upon a weak tablet, and the ink of his words is not effaced by the liquid waters! How great is thine art, O mortal, and no man knows how to examine it for its greatness. O how slender is the pen of thy mind to depict the mysteries! And (yet) there is no painter that is able to copy thy drawings.¹⁶

According to Narsai, the priest’s word is greater than that of Moses when the Red Sea obeyed his command (Ex 14:21).¹⁷ In fact, his speech is like God’s generative speech at the time of creation:

He also imitates the fashion (of Him) that brought into being the world; and he makes a voice to be heard (*mašma’ qālā*) like unto that which cried out in the world “in the beginning” (Gn 1:1).¹⁸ Like the Creator he also commands the common water, and instead of light there dawns from it the power of life. Not his own is the creation which he creates in the bosom of the water; but it belongs to the nod (of Him) that created creation out of nothing. That Command which “said, and there were made” things rational and senseless: the same commands by him, and men become a new being. That word (*hāy ba[r]t qālā*) which the waters heard, and brought forth creeping things (Gn 1:20–21): the same they

¹³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.366; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 43).

¹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.368; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 45).

¹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 47).

¹⁶ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 47).

¹⁷ “He holds out the key of his word (and) opens the door of the gift; and by (his) word he distributes presents to the King’s servants. He also stands as it were by the sea, after the likeness of Moses; and instead of a rod he lifts up his word over the dumb (elements). With the word of his mouth he strikes the waters, like the son of Amram; and they hearken to his voice more than to the voice of the son of the Hebrews.” (*Mēmṛā* 38 [ed. Mingana 1.344; Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 49]).

¹⁸ Cf. *Mēmṛā* 61 ‘On Creation II’ (ed. Gignoux 556–559.1–42).

hear from the mouth of the priest, and bring forth men. Greater is the fruit they bring forth now than that (former), by how much rational man is of more account than dumb things.¹⁹

In his homilies on creation Narsai also notes God's capacity to create instantaneously through speech.²⁰ He is not referring here simply to God's "speech" or the "sound" (*qālā*) of his voice, but a specific "vocal utterance" or "statement" (*ba[r]t qālā*), a common term in Narsai's works. However, it is important to emphasize that there are no verbatim similarities between God's speech at the time of creation in Genesis 1 and the language of the baptismal ritual. So what exactly does Narsai mean when he draws a connection between God's speech at creation and the priest's speech at baptism?

Although it does not correspond precisely with what we find in his treatment of creation elsewhere, it is possible that in this instance the "vocal utterance" is in fact the name of God itself, thus making this similar to the Jewish mystical notion that God created by his own name. However, this would be paradoxical because the name itself is not a "vocal utterance." Rather, he describes it as hidden in the priests' recitation of the Trinitarian formula. So also elsewhere Narsai states that God's voice at creation was actually only a "movement" (*zaw'ā*) in the angels' minds.²¹ Like the paradoxically inscribed speech of the priest, God wrote his words when he made creation but not with written letters,²² which according to another of Narsai's *mēmṛē* were not introduced until the time of Moses.²³

In the baptismal ritual the priest is the one who performs the washing, but he is not the one truly acting: "With the name of the Divinity (*šem 'itūtā*), the three Names, he consecrates the water, that it may suffice to accomplish the cleansing of the defiled. The defilement of men he cleanses with water; yet not by the water, but by the power of the name of the Divinity (*šem 'itūtā*) that there lights down (*maggen*)."²⁴ Grammatically it is unclear if it is "the power" or "the name" which "lights down" in this passage. In any case, by employing the term, *maggen*, especially in the context of the transmission of "power" (*ḥaylā*), Narsai seems to be attributing to the divine name characteristics typically associated with the Holy Spirit.²⁵ In this case, the divine name represents and subsumes the

¹⁹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.344–345; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 49–50).

²⁰ E.g., *Mēmṛā* 63 'On Creation I' (ed. Gignoux, 527.15–18).

²¹ *Mēmṛā* 61 'On Creation II' (ed. Gignoux, 570.241).

²² *Mēmṛā* 61 'On Creation II' (ed. Gignoux, 570.251).

²³ *Mēmṛā* 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)' (ed. Mingana 1.39–40).

²⁴ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.345; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 50).

²⁵ See *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.353; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 58–59) for a similar usage but with regard to the power of the Holy Spirit. On this term *maggen*, see S. P. Brock, "Maggnānūtā: A Technical Term in East Syrian Spirituality and its Background," in *Mélanges Antoine Guillaumont: Contributions à l'étude des christianismes orientaux* (Cahiers d'Orientalisme 20; Genève: Patrick Cramer, 1988), 121–129; idem, "From Annunciation to Pentecost: The Travels of a Technical Term," in E. Carr, S. Parenti, A.-A. Thiermeyer, and

three persons of the Trinity: “Of the name of the Divinity (*šem ’iṭutā*) he makes mention, and he says three times: ‘Father and Son and Holy Spirit, one equality’.”²⁶ The baptism is performed “in their name” (*bšemhon*). Note the use of the singular. As he states, “While they are one they are three.” In Narsai’s account the divine name even resembles the presence of God, the *shekhiṇah*, or *šḳintā*, as it appears in some Syriac texts. According to Narsai, God has built upon the earth a “bridal chamber,” a “sanctuary” “wherein they may sanctify His holy Name, until they are lifted up to the holy of holies that is hidden in the height.”²⁷ Elsewhere, Narsai refers to this same name as the one with which Jesus was honored at his baptism in the Jordan, an event that prefigures and establishes all Christian baptism.²⁸

The *šem ’iṭutā*, which as shorthand I have referred to using Connolly’s translation as “the name of the divinity,” appears often in Narsai’s works. The term *iṭutā* of course does not mean “divinity” in the same way that, for example, *alāhuṭā*, literally “God-ness,” does. Based on the existential particle *iṭ*, meaning “there is,” *iṭutā* is used to mean “existence,” but often in the sense of a form of existence that is eternal, “essence.” In fact, *iṭ* and the Syriac verb *hwā* are often mapped onto the distinction we find in Greek between *eīnai* and *gígnesthai*, being and becoming.

The expression *šem ’iṭutā* is used several times in reference to the so-called Great Commission of Mt 28:19, which is the textual source of the Trinitarian formula. Perhaps the most notable instance is in his homily, *On the Four Evangelists*, where Narsai states: “In this deed the apostles fulfilled the statement, / ‘Make disciples and baptize all the nations in the *šem ’iṭutā*. / The three names they received from him like a seal, / And they stamped people and struck them spiritually.”²⁹ And later in the same text he continues:

They taught everyone to meditate upon (or: to read syllable by syllable) (*lmethaggāyu*)
the *šem ’iṭutā*,

Three persons without distinctions through change.

Simpletons wrote a new book for rationality;

They instructed them to read (or: to call upon) the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

E. Velkovska (eds.), *EYAOΓHMA: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.* (SA 110, Analecta Liturgica 17; Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 71–91 (reprinted in S. P. Brock, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006], Chapter XIII); S. P. Brock, “Passover, Annunciation and Epiclesis: Some Remarks on the Term *aggen* in the Syriac Versions of Lk. 1:35,” *NT* 24:3 (1982): 222–233 (reprinted in idem, *Fire from Heaven*, Chapter XII). For the appearance of this term and its cognates in the work of Philoxenus of Mabbug, see D. A. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenus of Mabbug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 168–173.

²⁶ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.346; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 51).

²⁷ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.349; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 54).

²⁸ *Mēmṛā* 6 (ed. McLeod 97.426, 439).

²⁹ *Mēmṛā* 9 ‘*On the Four Evangelists*’ (Patriarchal Press 1.224). See also *Mēmṛā* 46 ‘*On Pentecost*’ (ed. Mingana 2.81).

They wrote three names upon the tablets of their minds,
 One *ʾitūtā* the continuity of which has no beginning.
 They drew with ink the hidden nature, which put on the body,
 So that it might be calling out (or: reading) the body and the soul in the hidden and the revealed.
 They depicted between the lines the likeness of the servant and the creator,
 So that everyone might see the hidden image with revealed senses.³⁰

This passage demonstrates how the *šem ʾitūtā*, which is implicit in the Trinitarian formula, names that unbounded power in which the three persons of the Trinity participate. However, it also helps explain the use of writing, inscription, and reading elsewhere in Narsai's treatment of the *šem ʾitūtā*: In contrast to speech, reading and writing are visual practices. Narsai employs the language of the visual to describe what is least visible. This is similar to the early Christian tendency to use corporeal, erotic love to describe the relationship with the divine while simultaneously characterizing sexuality as an imperfect part of life in an imperfect world. Through the visual Narsai refers to a higher form of seeing, a seeing of what cannot be seen, just as those early Christians were referring to a higher form of *eros*. The rhetorical device in both these cases entails the paradoxical use of what something is least to characterize what it is most.

Another instance of the power Narsai attributes to the divine name appears at the end of *On the Reproof of Women*, where he suggests that women who are engaged in divination and demonology should instead "depict the name of the divinity, its three names," upon their heart, "fixing" it as a "target" before themselves.³¹ This example is significant because it demonstrates Narsai correlating reliance on the divine name with magical practices, which often relied upon the power of names.

Narsai's theology of naming deserves more attention than I can provide here. The term "name," *šmā*, appears often in his works, and at times he seems to depend on what we already find in Ephrem's corpus. As for Ephrem, for Narsai the names God takes on, "borrowed names," are examples of divine condescension,³² but "borrowed name" has become a cliché technical term in

³⁰ *Mēmṛā* 9 'On the Four Evangelists' (Patriarchal Press 1.229–230). Cf. *Mēmṛā* 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)' (ed. Mingana 1.54) and *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' (ed. Mingana 1.84).

³¹ *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.365). See also Theodore of Mopsuestia beating the demon Mopsus, *Mēmṛā* 11 'On the Three Doctors' (Patriarchal Press 1.263.15–18): "With the name of the creator the just one yoked the demon of the city, And he taught him to repeat the three names, one *ʾitūtā*. / The worker of righteousness was bearing the three names, And he shot them like arrows at the heretics."

³² E.g., *Mēmṛā* 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)' (ed. Mingana 1.33–34) where *kyānā* ("nature" or "created being") is described as a "borrowed name" when used for God. See also *Mēmṛā* 13 'On Supplication' (ed. Mingana 1.120–121) and *Mēmṛā* 15 'On Reproof' (ed. Mingana 1.152), which addresses naming as a form of condescension.

Narsai's usage, which is even translated by McLeod as "metaphor."³³ (There are several of these apparent technical terms in Narsai's oeuvre, such as *kurā*, "crucible.") "Borrowed names" are neither "true" (*šarrir*) nor "exact" (*ḥattit*), as in Ephrem's works where "exact names" refers to "proper names," ones that belong essentially to an entity.³⁴ The "reality" behind a name is its "truth" (*šrārā*). According to Ephrem, "essence" (*ʾiṭutā*) is God's true name, which he also equates with "the existent" (*ʾityā*).³⁵ This is why for him there can only be one *ʾiṭutā*, one *ʾityā*. These nouns should not be pluralized.³⁶

Ephrem also already makes the link between *ʾiṭutā* and the divine name represented by the tetragrammaton. He brings together the three names, Father, Son, and Spirit, in the baptismal ritual and emphasizes the "power" (*ḥaylā*) that emerges from them.³⁷ In this he is borrowing from a long Greek tradition going back at least to Philo of Alexandria of connecting the name of God to the verb for "to be" (Greek *eînai*), in particular as it is played upon at Ex 3:14. At Sinai, according to Ephrem, "He revealed the name to Moses; for He called Himself *Ehyeh* / Which is the name of the Being (*dašma* [*h*]/w *dʾiṭutā*); but never did He call / Another with this name, as it were with His own names / Calling many; so that through one name which He allowed / He points out that He alone is the Being (*ʾityā*) and there is not another."³⁸

Ephrem's approach is apparent in Narsai's works but, as is common in how he employs Ephrem's language and ideas, with new emphases.³⁹ Narsai borrows from Ephrem's name theology, but he goes in a different direction, and in sheer quantity of references Narsai has a much greater interest in names. As for Ephrem, the "name" can refer to the simple name of a person⁴⁰ or to the "glory" or "fame" of something.⁴¹ However, in his increased usage Narsai at times seems to treat the "name" as a stand-in for the thing itself. For example, in Narsai's account when slavery is introduced into creation it is the "name of slavery" and

³³ At McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 39.19: *bašmā šilā* is rendered "in a metaphorical sense."

³⁴ T. Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names in the Genuine Works of Ephrem* (Kerala: SEERI, 2015), 134–139.

³⁵ Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 194–203.

³⁶ Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 290–306. See *Mēmṛā II* 'On the Three Doctors' (Patriarchal Press 1.260) for an example of *ʾityē* in reference to two of the persons of the Trinity.

³⁷ Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 147–152.

³⁸ Ephrem the Syrian, *Against Heresies*, 53.12 (ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra Haereses* [CSCO 169–170; Leuven: Peeters, 1957], 204; trans. Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 292).

³⁹ Ephrem differs from Narsai in his specific emphasis on how the "name" taken up at Baptism is "Christ": Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 267–278.

⁴⁰ On the changing of Abraham's name, see *Mēmṛā I* 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)' (ed. Mingana 1.18, 26).

⁴¹ *Mēmṛā I* 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)' (ed. Mingana 1.27): *lašmā dhāy meštutā*.

the “name of freedman” which God “drew among the earthly.”⁴² Furthermore, one commonly “honors the name of the creator” or “calls upon his name, son of God,” in relating to the deity.⁴³ There are many examples of this use of “names” in Narsai’s works and a thorough study would take some time.

However, it is worth considering exactly how we should translate the expression *šem ʾitūtā* in Narsai’s usage (as opposed to Connolly’s “name of the Divinity”). There are puzzling aspects to this repeated noun combination in the construct state (that is, a genitival relation between the two nouns). Three alternative translations are:

1. “Name ‘*ʾitūtā*,” that is, the actual name is “*ʾitūtā*,” as for example if I were to say “my name, ‘Adam.’” However, one of the characteristics of the *ʾitūtā*, as well as of the name itself, is that it is hidden. I would not be able to say, “My name, ‘Adam’, which is hidden and unknowable.”
2. “Name of the *ʾitūtā*,” or “the *ʾitūtā*’s name.” In other words, the *ʾitūtā* has a name, which we may not be able to know because it is hidden.
3. “*ʾitūtā*-related” or “essential name,” and then even “true name.” Narsai uses less adjectives than other authors, and we can often translate usages of the construct state in Semitic languages with an English adjective and noun.⁴⁴ This is a translation method often useful in approaching Narsai’s works.

At first glance 2 and 3 seem to offer better ways to translate this expression. However, Narsai often makes reference to an etymological link between *ʾitūtā* and God’s name as it appears at Ex 3:14, the well-known text where God reveals his name and apparently, at least as the biblical text is read, the meaning of the tetragrammaton. In this passage, when Moses asks God for his name the response God gives is, “I am what I am,” the Hebrew of which is simply transliterated in the Peshitta Old Testament. However, a common understanding of this often garbled transliteration of the Hebrew, one we find from the fourth century onward among Syriac Christians, is that it was a statement about divine existence (as it was understood from the Greek of the Septuagint).⁴⁵ For Narsai, God “exists and exists” (*ʾitaw[hy] wʾitaw[hy]*). This means that when he employs the term *ʾitūtā* it is in some way onomastic and not just a reference to God’s “essence.” He plays on the cognate term *ʾitaw(hy)*, and of even more significance he makes several references to God’s revelation of his name to Moses at Sinai. This lends weight to translation 1 above, in which case *ʾitūtā* is God’s name.

Although Narsai’s conception of the divine name appears in several passages which refer to Ex 3:14, he does not seem to be aware of the tetragram-

⁴² *Mēmra 1 ‘On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)’* (ed. Mingana 1.6).

⁴³ *Mēmra 1 ‘On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)’* (ed. Mingana 1.4, 7; see also 1.15, 26, 28).

⁴⁴ On so-called adjectival genitives in Syriac, see A. M. Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in Its Greco-Roman Context* (LSAWS 11; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 142.

⁴⁵ Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names*, 299.

maton's common usage in the Hebrew Bible. In the Peshiṭta Old Testament it is commonly translated by the Syriac *māryā*, "The Lord," which means that the divine name is less common in Narsai's reading of scripture. However, in over a dozen different passages Narsai refers to God either in the third person as *ʾitaw(hy) w'itaw(hy)*⁴⁶ ("he exists and exists") or in the second person as *ʾitayk w'itayk* ("you exist and exist"),⁴⁷ or puts into God's mouth the first person expression *ʾitay w'itay* ("I exist and I exist").⁴⁸ In fact, it seems that the usage of *ʾitaw(hy)* in his works is weighted: He tends to use it in reference to God. The etymological significance of *ʾitūtā* also appears in his play on the idiom *ʾayti lahwāyā*, "He brought into being," the word *ʾayti*, though having no actual etymological connection to *ʾit*, resembles it with its sequence of letters *ʾ-y-t*.⁴⁹

As one might expect, the most significant passage describing the divine name in Narsai's corpus is his account of God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush. Narsai recounts the epiphany of Exodus 3 in detail, adding that what appeared in the fire was God's chariot, thus linking Moses' vision with that of Ezekiel. Moses explains to God that he will be asked for the "precise name" (*šmā hattiṭā*) of the one who sent him, for there are many beings named gods.

The creator saw that he was making a request for his name,
And he revealed and showed the *šem ʾitūtā*, which is without beginning.
His *šem ʾitūtā* he taught him to reveal before the Hebrews,
That "he exists and exists" without beginning and without end.
"I am not called by a name among the insipid
But by power and by creative acts (*waḥsuʾrānē d'āḥoḍutā*).
I am the existent one (*ʾityā ʾitay*) and my name is my incomprehensible *ʾitūtā*,
And no one attributes an alien name to me except for 'I am'.
If you seek to learn the name which proclaims my lordship,
'God' alone I am called and again 'Creator' (*āḥoḍā*).
āhiyā (ehyeh) then (*ʾšārāyāh (ašer ehyeh)*)⁵⁰ is my *šem ʾitūtā*,"
And in order that it might be confirmed he stated it twice (*literally* doubled the voice
two times) (Ex 3:14).

The son of Amram heard the *šem ʾitūtā*, which exists and is hidden,
And he was concerned about how the people would believe something that is hidden.
"Go then and say," he repeated to the one who was sent,
"I am the God of your fathers, of Abraham and Isaac."⁵¹

⁴⁶ E.g., *Mēmṛā 1 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.12); *Mēmṛā 6 'On Epiphany'* (ed. McLeod 92.353).

⁴⁷ E.g., *Mēmṛā 13 'On Supplication'* (ed. Mingana, 1.120); *Mēmṛā 64 'On Creation V'* (ed. Gignoux, 658.351).

⁴⁸ E.g., *Mēmṛā 62 'On Creation III'* (ed. Gignoux, 582.17); *Mēmṛā 1 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.17).

⁴⁹ *Mēmṛā 44 'On the New Creation "New Sunday"'* (ed. Mingana 2.71). See the use of the idiom at *Mēmṛā 62 'On Creation III'* (ed. Gignoux, 590.123, 596.216, and 602.288).

⁵⁰ The vocalization of the Hebrew at Ex 3:14 is confused and appears differently in various Syriac manuscripts.

⁵¹ *Mēmṛā 72 'On the Miracles of Moses'* (ed. Mingana 2.291).

It seems Narsai is aware of the meaning of the Hebrew that he garbles: Hence his repeated references to the one who “exists and exists.” And so God’s name and the meaning of that name correspond for him. However, the anomalousness of the Hebrew in this passage renders Ex 3:14, which has always been a riddle, even more enigmatic: The Hebrew name of God is meaningless in Syriac.⁵²

For Narsai the *šem ’iṭuṭā* refers to both God’s name and the referent behind the name simultaneously: “true” names for Narsai, as for Ephrem, point to the “truth” or “reality” behind them.⁵³ This may explain the power of the divine name: It is not simply a name, but it is “being” itself. Thus, the various passages where it seems to be equated with the divine “power” (*ḥaylā*).⁵⁴ Yet it is also an intermediary working between God and the material world. To borrow from Naomi Janowitz’s discussion of what is commonly known as “magic” in antiquity, the representative capacity of the *šem ’iṭuṭā* makes it “iconic” in a Piercean sense: It is not an arbitrary signifier, for it also has a formal resemblance to what it represents.⁵⁵ Its onomastic quality allows it to exist as a hybrid, representing God who is outside of this world but acting within it.⁵⁶

In several metrical homilies Narsai betrays an anxiety about the proper understanding of divine revelation. A sketch of his engagement with the problem of revelation will demonstrate the broader conceptual frame in which his understanding of the divine name functions. The nature of revelation is a distinctive issue in Narsai’s homily, ‘*On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)*’.⁵⁷ The homily provides a historical reading of Genesis 15, 18, and 22 but concludes with a Messianic focus on Genesis 22. The visibility of God’s revelation in Genesis 15 and 18 is a distinctive problem for Narsai, whereas God’s communication with Abraham in Genesis 22, which is described as auditory, is less fraught because Abraham only heard God or was shown things in the world, such as the place of sacrifice, while God revealed “in his mind” the typological connection between Isaac and Jesus.⁵⁸

⁵² For discussion of Ex 3:14 and its reception, see R. J. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God: From the Beginnings to the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), *passim*.

⁵³ E.g., Narsai’s use of the etymology of the name Israel at *Mēmṛā 2 ‘On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)’* (ed. Mingana 1.36).

⁵⁴ E.g., *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the True Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.114).

⁵⁵ N. Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), xxii–xxiii; cf. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton*, 130. In her article in this volume, E. Muehlberger raises the difficult issue of the ontology of Narsai’s language, arguing that certain language he uses should not be treated as mere metaphor (pp. 175–185). E. Walsh, also in this volume, emphasizes how for Narsai “words exert power” (p. 216).

⁵⁶ Cf. *Mēmṛā 62 ‘On Creation III’* (ed. Gignoux, 600.281–282): “His image is like the creator, in name but not in nature, for it has authority over everything he created as a creator over what belongs to him.”

⁵⁷ *Mēmṛā 1 ‘On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)’* (ed. Mingana 1.1–28).

⁵⁸ *Mēmṛā 1 ‘On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)’* (ed. Mingana 1.20): “With the eyes of the body he showed him the place of the sacrifice of his son.”

The appearance of the three guests at Mamre in Genesis 18:1–15 had a long tradition of Christian interpretation by Narsai's day. The three strangers who come to Abraham have often been interpreted as angels, or God and two angels, or as representing the Trinity itself. Narsai is specifically concerned with the constitution of their appearance.

The righteous one saw three likenesses (*demwātā*) of three men,
And they were walking according to (*lwāt*) the likenesses which they wore.
Abraham, too, was looking at them as if they were men,
And he did not know that the vision (*hzātā*) was without composition (*dlā rukkābā*).
The nature of the spiritual ones is without composition and without body (*dlā gušmā*),
But when they are sent to the earthly they show a body.
It is not that they truly possess a body subject to change,
But they show a non-composite (*lā mrakkabtā*) likeness in the air.⁵⁹

Later Narsai claims, "In a human body Abraham saw the God of all; It was not a body but in a manner that was like a body."⁶⁰ It was, he continues, "like a body although there was no body." Narsai highlights the paradox, or at least interpretive difficulty, of the meeting at Mamre by repeating several times a similar phrasing: Something happened, but it did not. "He saw him, but he did not see him;"⁶¹ God "entered, but he did not enter." It was an "invisible vision."⁶² "Composition" in this case is a fundamental characteristic of the material world, which consists of complex entities made up of parts (as opposed to God who is simplex) and sensory perception entails a process of mental decomposition and recombination of these entities. A vision without composition is then a paradox of immateriality.

According to Narsai, the appearance described in Gn 18 was all the more a wonder because of the meal in which the guests partook, which was both "spiritual and bodily (*paḡrānāyā*)."⁶³ Abraham was puzzled as to whether what he saw was a body or not.⁶⁴ It seemed to partake of the food, but "the divine essence (*ītyā*) is higher than bodily likenesses (*demwātā paḡrānāyātā*)."⁶⁵ Narsai later explains that God "revealed himself inasmuch as the human is capable of seeing (him); the created was not capable of seeing its constitutor, and because of this he depicted likenesses before his pupils."⁶⁶

⁵⁹ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.6–7, see also p. 11).

⁶⁰ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.8).

⁶¹ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.11).

⁶² *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.13).

⁶³ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.9).

⁶⁴ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.8, 10).

⁶⁵ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.11).

⁶⁶ *Mēmṛā 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)'* (ed. Mingana 1.14).

Narsai's *On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)* runs over the same issues as the previous metrical homily.⁶⁷ He repeats paradoxical affirmative and negative statements about various biblical revelations: We do not have the language to describe these events, and so we say that they happened and that they did not. The description of these events strikes up against the very limits of language. According to Narsai, there were two types of biblical revelation: "In two likenesses he spoke with them, by body and by spirit, because their nature was bodily and spiritual." Narsai continues: "He was shown to those of the house of Abraham in a corporeal manner (*gušmānā'it*), / And as if at a human being they were looking at him by the revelation of his words (or: at the very revelation of his words). / In a bodily manner (*gušmānā'it*) he rebuked Adam for his foolish transgression, / And as a human voice (or: sound) he heard his steps within paradise."⁶⁸

God communicated with Cain "in a corporeal manner" (*gušmānā'it*) using a "voice," whereas he made Enoch hear "in his intellect" (*bhawnā*). Then again he communicated with Noah with an "embodied voice" (*bqālā gšimā*).⁶⁹ Abraham he "was instructing by voice and by silence (*šetqā*)."⁷⁰ God "entered unto his servant in a corporeal manner (*gušmānā'it*) while not embodied (*lā mḡaššam*)."⁷¹ God "showed himself in a bodily manner while he did not show himself. He showed a body while his divinity had no body."

Narsai demonstrates a concern to categorize and explain how different revelations took place, even distinguishing between those visions that are dreams and those experienced while awake.⁷² Jacob, who became "Israel," which Narsai notes means "he saw God," did not see God "in a bodily manner" but saw "a vision which was spoken in (or: by?) the name of God," and he saw it "with his senses"⁷³ (here, he means "inner senses").

Narsai further specifies:

That *ʾitūtā* is not visible to spectators,
Nor are spectators able to look upon its hiddenness.
He taught the righteous the name of his *ʾitūtā* (*šem ʾitūtēh*) by the outer appearance
of a vision,
So that he might inject in those who are not righteous zeal that they might become
righteous.
Jacob was righteous and the habits of his way of life were beloved,
And he placed well upon him the name, "spectator of divinity" (i. e., Israel).
By an eye of the spirit he showed him the non-embodied (*lā mḡaššamtā*) vision

⁶⁷ *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.29–56).

⁶⁸ *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.30).

⁶⁹ *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.31).

⁷⁰ Some of the same biblical passages are addressed as in *Mēmṛā 1*.

⁷¹ *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.33).

⁷² *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.32, 34, 36).

⁷³ *Mēmṛā 2 'On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)'* (ed. Mingana 1.36).

And taught him the order by which he might depict its likeness before spectators (ḥazzāyē).⁷⁴

Narsai also addresses Joseph, Job, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, David, and others, continuing to draw distinctions: Elijah heard and saw “openly (*bḡelyā*)” and “in a corporeal manner (*gušmānā’it*)” with “his own eyes.”⁷⁵ Elisha “saw spiritual beings with the eye of the body.”⁷⁶ In contrast, Isaiah’s vision of the throne was “in a spiritual manner (*ruḥānā’it*)” and “not with the eyes.”⁷⁷ “For the vision was incorporeal (*lā gušmānā*) which he saw in his mind, and the name of God was depicted within it but it was not God.”

Elsewhere, in another metrical homily, Narsai focuses on the details of the corporeal and incorporeal aspects of Isaiah’s vision in the temple, but in ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ he moves on to later biblical figures.⁷⁸ Zechariah saw visions only in his mind, for God “depicted likenesses without composition.” Regarding Ezekiel, Narsai claims, “That chariot (*markabtā*) which the prophet saw was not composite (*law mrakkabtā*) nor corporeal was the course of the wheels under it.”⁷⁹ (Narsai seems to be making a graphic pun here because *law mrakkabtā* could also be vocalized as *law markabtā*, “not a chariot.”) After addressing Daniel’s and Peter’s visions Narsai finally addresses Paul, who in his ascent to heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4) “heard a speech that was unspeakable.”⁸⁰ Paul’s paradoxical experience was at the time of a new form of revelation in the incarnation, which itself announced the general resurrection to come. By the end of this *mēmṛā* Narsai demands that his audience “see” God’s love in the incarnation.⁸¹

This concluding turn to the incarnation points to one of the sources of Narsai’s heightened concern with materiality. In the background to his distinguishing between different types of revelation stands the endless Christian debate about the incarnation and the relationship between spirit and body. The revelations to the heroes of the Bible, those moments of seeing but not seeing, took place in the same way that the baptismal and eucharistic rituals offer immaterial transformation. Narsai puts speech, sound, and vision through the same process of rationalization through which the divine and human Jesus Christ was being filtered. This process and the stark perspective on materiality which it could

⁷⁴ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana 1.36–37).

⁷⁵ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana 1.42).

⁷⁶ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana 1.43).

⁷⁷ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana 1.43).

⁷⁸ *Mēmṛā* 58 ‘*On Isaiah’s Vision*’ (ed. Mingana 2.131–44), which is translated in T. Kuzhuppil, *The Vision of the Prophet Isaiah: A Theological Study of Narsai’s Interpretation of Isaiah 6* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2006), 171–189 (Appendix).

⁷⁹ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana 1.48).

⁸⁰ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. Mingana. 1.49, 53, 55); see also *Mēmṛā* 8 ‘*On Peter and Paul*’ (ed. Mingana 1.81).

⁸¹ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ (ed. 1.56).

foster heightened the imaginative context of ritual as well, for ritual was a fundamental mediation between corporeal, mortal human beings and the invisible God. In contrast, Narsai claims in his *Mēmṛā* 44 ‘On the New Creation “New Sunday”’, that in the end time creation will see God’s power made manifest, God will “turn the gaze of the universe to himself so that they will see while he judges and renews each,” and then God will “shout a vocal utterance” (*ḥdā ba[r]t qālā*), the same he used to create the world out of nothing.⁸² In this world, in this time, however, we have access only through the spiritual senses. For Narsai, the baptismal ritual was an opportunity to foster these senses.⁸³

There are a number of avenues one could go down in an attempt to find the source of, or at least the cultural ideas neighboring, Narsai’s understanding of the divine name. The concern about materiality in his works reflects the increasing influx of Platonism – more broadly defined – into Syriac culture, especially through the contemporary translation of monastic literature and certain Greek philosophical texts. More specifically, despite his reliance on the language of images, Narsai’s simultaneous anxiety concerning their materiality corresponds with the growing influence of the thought of Evagrius of Pontus among many Syriac Christians.⁸⁴ Furthermore, whereas his concern about materiality also may resonate with Manichean ideas, his emphasis on the divine name and its power is reminiscent of what we find in some Jewish texts and in magical literature. There are also apparent similarities to the Valentinian baptismal ritual, but Valentinians put emphasis on the “name” providing identification for Christians, whereas for Narsai the greater significance is the power itself of the name, its capacity to effect the ritual.

Christianity often posits divides that require bridging: This is the basis of incarnational theology. The greater the divide, the greater the wonder (For example, one may note how Narsai’s regular use of rhetorical exclamation often occurs in reference to the bridging of such divides.) Ultimately, Narsai’s argument is about mediation: the priest as mediator, the name as mediator, and the ritual as mediation. Mediation, especially when concerns about materiality are heightened, can become an ever expanding process. Acts represent words which in turn represent acts, and speech represents writing which in turn is represented by speech. This creates at times paradoxical circles and at other times an increasing series of frames, as we also find on the syntactic level in

⁸² *Mēmṛā* 44 ‘On the New Creation “New Sunday”’ (ed. Mingana 2.69).

⁸³ This is not unlike the cultivation of the senses we find in his scriptural exegesis, which “was not an end in itself but a tool for facilitating the spiritual development of an audience” (Daniel Becerra, p. 10 in this volume).

⁸⁴ C. Stewart, “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 173–204. Narsai’s understanding of how the liturgy is an effective and practical source of knowledge of the divine coincides with what we find on the other end of the theological spectrum, for example, in the works of Philoxenus of Mabbug, who was clearly influenced by Evagrius (Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenus of Mabbug*, 144–177).

Narsai's idiosyncratic repetition of words in genitival chains and his redundant play with verbal roots. This multiple framing to the point of circularity is apparent in Narsai's baptismal homilies: They are compositions to be performed, but they are also about performance of a text, that is, the liturgy. In them the ekphrastic language of text/depiction/image is used to describe that performance, a performance that is effective because of a power we all should be able to see but not with our eyes.

Jewish-Christian Anti-Paulinism and Merkabah Mysticism around the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis

Narsai's Polemics against Deniers of Biblical Studies in Context*

Dmitrij F. Bumazhnov

Preliminaries

It is generally known that the East-Syrian poet and exegete Narsai worked as teacher of exegesis and director of the theological School of Edessa in Byzantine North-Mesopotamia.¹ After the closure of the School in 489 due to its dyophysite theology following in the footsteps of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius and its transfer to Nisibis on the Sasanian territory, Narsai kept both positions until his death about 500.² Narsai's position as the head of the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis makes his writings particularly relevant for the study of religious education in the early East-Syrian tradition.³ The present article focuses on *Mēmra* 8 'On Peter and Paul'. In 1958, Paul Krüger provided a German translation of this homily and suggested that, in this text, Narsai polemicizes against

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¹ For a short biography of Narsai, see P. Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai sur la création* (PO 34; Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 419–423; D. W. Winkler, "Narsai von Nisibis, † 503," in W. Klein (ed.), *Syrische Kirchenväter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), 111–118; L. Van Rompay, "Narsai," in *GEDSH*, 303–304; and Butts's contribution to this volume (pp. 1–8).

² A. Vööbus argues that Narsai left Edessa shortly after 471 followed by the second, larger exodus from the School in 489 ("Un vestige d'une lettre de Narsai et son importance historique," *OS* [1964]: 522–523). For criticism of this view, see A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 74–75.

³ About Narsai's position and activities at the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis, see A. Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (CSCO 266; Leuven: Peeters, 1965), 57–121 and Becker, *Fear of God*, 70–75.

a Jewish-Christian group.⁴ A close reading of Krüger's article, however, shows that he mistranslated and, accordingly, misinterpreted almost all the passages relevant for his thesis.⁵ The purpose of the present article is to investigate whether Krüger's suggestion remains nevertheless valid and, if so, to speculate what it can contribute to our knowledge about the process of education in Narsai's milieu.

Mēmrā 8 'On Peter and Paul'

Despite the title, the apostle Peter does not play any role in the *mēmrā*: Its only hero is the apostle of the nations. After a more or less traditional description of the most important stations in the apostle Paul's life, Narsai delivers, towards the end of the text, an extended passage where he polemicizes against some people who for various reasons do not recognize Paul's authority. This passage can be divided into two parts corresponding to two kinds of opponents Narsai has in view and to the questions discussed. In the first part, Narsai calls his adversaries "heretics," whose wrong opinions have to do with the most important parts of Christian dogmatics: doctrine of God and Christology.⁶ In the second part, Narsai seems to speak about the same people, but he does not use the term "heretics." He also does not accuse them of holding any false teaching; rather, Narsai blames their refusal to read the Holy Scripture, especially the apostle Paul's letters which, in his eyes, is the cause of their aberrations. I will examine both parts more closely following their sequence in the *mēmrā*.

⁴ P. Krüger, "Ein Missionsdokument aus frühchristlicher Zeit," *ZMR* 42 (1958): 288 fn. 54, fn. 56; 289 fn. 57. Krüger uses the word "Judaisten" which is somewhat ambiguous in German, but what he means are obviously Christians with Jewish background. The ongoing discussion about the appropriateness of the terms "Jewish-Christianity" and "Jewish-Christian" has produced many important insights in the subject and is too vast to be summarized here in full. I refer instead to the last significant overview by A. Y. Reed, *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism: Collected Essays* (TSAJ 171; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 110–115. Reed's own approach comprises three possible cases of applying the questionable terms and "attempts to avoid the imposition of any single image of 'Jewish-Christianity' on all our sources as well as the problematic equation of Jewish ethnicity with specific proclivities or limitations" (p. 112). In the first case put forward by Reed "the adjective 'Jewish-Christian' can be applied to sources ... which exhibit more and different 'Jewish' features than modern scholars typically associate with early and late antique Christianity." It is in this sense that the term "Jewish-Christian" will be used in the present investigation.

⁵ I restrain myself from giving a detailed account of instances where Krüger's interpretations seem less than convincing. Instead, I would like to deliver my own reading of the passages in question. If not indicated otherwise all translations are mine.

⁶ E. g., Narsai, *Mēmrā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.86.1), cf. *Mēmrā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.8).

The “Heretics”

In the following I wish to argue that the group of “heretics” does not seem to be homogenous. Rather it consists of, at least, two distinct kinds of false teachers: those advocating Christological ideas which are wrong from the point of view of Narsai, and proponents of God’s limitedness.

Christological Heresies

Before confronting the “heretics” and their teachings, Narsai lists a whole range of Christian theological doctrines allegedly to be found in the apostle Paul’s epistles. In particular, he mentions Trinitarian theology,⁷ the fact that God’s essence is unlimited,⁸ God’s impassibility,⁹ the dignity of the human body demonstrated through the incarnation,¹⁰ and some other topics. Narsai’s argumentation shows unmistakably that, being eager to make Paul the proponent of dyophysite Christological teaching in the spirit of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius, he ascribes to him its formulas. Consider, for example, the following statement: “He (i. e., the apostle Paul) divided the natures (of Christ) in what they had been different from each other and combined them in unity to one prosopon.”¹¹

It is against the background of the latter passage that Narsai’s claim concerning the apostle Paul’s teaching of God’s impassibility should be seen: Stressing the impassibility of God in Christ was one of the most important parts of the Christology of the Church of the East,¹² which maintained that both Miaphysites

⁷ Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.7–8): “You (i. e., the apostle Paul) demonstrated the equality of the Father, and the Son, and the (Holy) Spirit.”

⁸ Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.9–10): “You taught us that the (Divine) essence is in itself unlimited.”

⁹ Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.10–11): “And you showed us that it (i. e., the Divine essence) is not subject to passion (*literally* to passibility).” Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.21–1.85.3): “He (i. e., the apostle Paul) divided them (i. e., two natures in Christ) but did not tear them apart one from another and he made them equal through the will which wanted it. He gave each of them its proper (quality) according to what they were so that the (Divine) essence would *not be submitted to passions* through His (i. e., God’s) assuming our (nature).”

¹⁰ Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.15–16): “Your voice preached the Word and the *body* among the mortals, two (things) which are divided by their natures and (made) a unity together.” Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.11–12): “In the Spirit of revelation you demonstrated the mystery of the salvation of our life (that is to say) that He (i. e., Christ) fulfilled and accomplished the will of the Hidden One through the manifestation of *our body*.”

¹¹ Narsai, *Mēmrā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.84.19–20). Cf. also fn. 9 and 10 above. For the roots of the Christological term *parṣopā* “person” in the theology of the Church of the East, see F. G. McLeod, “Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Understanding of Two *Hypostaseis* and Two *Prosōpa* Coinciding in One Common *Prosōpon*,” *J ECS* 18 (2010): 392–424.

¹² See, for example, the credal statement issued at the synod at Seleucia-Ctesiphon held under

and the proponents of the council of Chalcedon were wrong in accepting theopaschism, i.e., the notion that God suffered in Christ according to the flesh.¹³ Narsai's high esteem for the human body can likewise be understood in the same Christological vein; as it appears, he sees its dignity deeply rooted in the fact of the incarnation.¹⁴

While criticizing the false opinions of the "heretics," Narsai makes them hold views exactly opposite to those he has put in Paul's mouth. According to him, the "heretics" both were committed to theopaschism¹⁵ and denigrated the dignity of the human body, probably by their incorrect Christology.¹⁶ It seems reasonable to assume that these people most likely were Miaphysites and/or Chalcedonians. Narsai depicts them as enemies of the apostle Paul who hate both him and his writings.¹⁷ By doing so, Narsai tries to discredit the "heretics" depicting them to be in severe conflict with one of the most authoritative Christian theologians.

A different case seems to be the notion of God's unlimitedness that, Narsai claims, both was preached by Paul and is now denied by the "heretics."¹⁸ Here, unlike the two previous issues, a clear connection with the Christological controversy is hardly present, so that this idea deserves a separate treatment. To provide an overview of Narsai's polemics against "heretics" discussed so far, I summarize them in tabular form.

the Catholicos Akakios in 486: "And if someone considers, or teaches others, that suffering and change (*haššā wšuhlāpā*) have attached (*nqēp*) to the divinity of our Lord, and (if) he does not preserve, with respect to the union (*ḥdāyutā*) of the *prosopon* of our Saviour, a confession of perfect God and perfect Man, let such a person be anathema." (ed. J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil des synodes nestoriens publié <...> d'après le ms. syriaque 332 de la Bibliothèque Nationale et le ms. K.VI, 4 du Musée Borgia, à Rome* [Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902], 55.6–9; trans. S.P. Brock, "The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries: Preliminary Considerations and Materials," in G.D. Dragas [ed.], *Aksum – Thyateira: A Festschrift For Archbishop Methodios of Thyateira and Great Britain* [London: Thyateira House, 1985], 134).

¹³ For the Christological teaching of the Church of the East, see S.P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," *BJRULM* 78 (1996): 23–35, especially the table on page 27 (reprinted in idem, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* [VCSS 863; Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006], no. 1).

¹⁴ See fn. 10 above.

¹⁵ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.15–17): "He (i.e., the devil) taught you (i.e., "heretics") to attack the heaven (*literally* height) in respect to the essence (of God) and he showed you the detestable *path of passibility*." Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.19): "... and he (i.e., the devil) taught those who are similar to him that the *Hidden One is subject to passions* ..."

¹⁶ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.19): "... and he (i.e., the devil) taught those who are similar to him that He (i.e., the Hidden One) denies our body (its) great dignity."

¹⁷ See Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.4–6, 10–13).

¹⁸ For Paul, see fn. 8 above. For the "heretics," see Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 'On Peter and Paul'* (ed. Mingana 1.85.17–18): "He (i.e., the devil) alienated you (i.e., "heretics") from the study of Paul's word since he saw that he (i.e., Paul) preached the *nature of the Hidden One being not limited*."

<i>Theological themes</i>	<i>Teaching of the apostle Paul</i>	<i>Teaching of the "heretics"</i>
Trinitarian theology	1 You (i. e., the apostle Paul) demonstrated the equality of the Father, and the Son, and the (Holy) Spirit (ed. Mingana 1.84.7–8).	1 –
God's essence is unlimited (no apparent connection with Christology)	2 You taught us that the (Divine) <i>essence is in itself unlimited</i> (ed. Mingana 1.84.9–10).	2 He (i. e., the devil) alienated you (i. e., "heretics") from the study of Paul's word since he saw that he (i. e., Paul) preached <i>the nature of the Hidden One being not limited</i> (ed. Mingana 1.85.17–18).
God's impassibility (connections with Christology)	3.1 You showed us that it (i. e., the Divine essence) is <i>not subject to passions</i> (literally passibility) (ed. Mingana 1.84.10–11). 3.2 He (i. e., the apostle Paul) divided them (i. e., the natures) but did not tear them apart one from another and he made them equal through the will which wanted it. He gave each of them its proper (quality) according to what they were so that <i>the (Divine) essence would not be submitted to passions</i> through His (i. e., God's) assuming our <nature> (ed. Mingana 1.84.21–85.3).	3.1–2 He (i. e., the devil) taught you (i. e., "heretics") to attack the heaven (<i>literally</i> height) in respect to the essence (of God) and he showed you the detestable path of passibility (ed. Mingana 1.85.15–17). 3.1–2 He (i. e., the devil) taught those who are similar to him that the <i>Hidden One is subject to passions</i> (ed. Mingana 1.85.19).
Dignity of the human body (connections with Christology)	4.1 In the Spirit of revelation you (i. e., the apostle Paul) demonstrated the mystery of the salvation of our life (that is to say) that He (i. e., Christ) fulfilled and accomplished the will of the Hidden One through the <i>manifestation of our body</i> (ed. Mingana 1.84.11–12). 4.2 Your voice preached the Word and <i>the body</i> among the mortals, two (things) which are divided by their natures and (made) equal to each other. (...) He (i. e., the apostle	4.1–2 And he (i. e., the devil) taught those who are similar to him that He (i. e., the Hidden One) denied <i>our body</i> <its> <i>great dignity</i> (ed. Mingana 1.85.19).

<i>Theological themes</i>	<i>Teaching of the apostle Paul</i>	<i>Teaching of the “heretics”</i>
	Paul) divided the natures in what they had been different from each other and combined them in unity to one <i>prosopon</i> (i. e., person) (ed. Mingana 1.84.15–16, 19–20).	

Proponents of God’s Limitedness

Contrary to the Christological and Trinitarian formulas discussed above, we do have an ancient Christian source where the apostle Paul, or rather a person meant to represent him, indeed makes a case for God being unlimited in terms very similar to those used by Narsai. This source is Homily 17 of the so-called *Pseudo-Clementines*.

The two *Pseudo-Clementines* writings – referred to as *Recognitions* and *Homilies* – in their present form were written in Greek probably in Antioch around the year 300 and “reflect a distinctive variety of early Jewish Christianity.”¹⁹ One of the most striking features of these texts is their marked anti-Paulinism which finds its expression in the theological debates between the apostle Peter and Simon the Magician, Peter being the spokesman of the author and Simon – the literary mask of the apostle Paul.²⁰ In Homily 17 *Ps.-Clement* reports about one of those discussions. Peter argues that God does have a human-like form:

He (i. e., Jesus) taught us to fear God whose angels of our most insignificant believers stand upright in heaven always beholding the face of the Father.²¹ For *He* (i. e., the Father) *has an outward form* because of (His) highest and unique beauty and (He has) all limbs (of the body but) not for use.²²

¹⁹ F.S. Jones, *The Syriac Pseudo-Clementines. An Early Version of the First Christian Novel* (Apocryphes 14; Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 13.

²⁰ For the anti-Paulinism of the *Pseudo-Clementines* in general and specifically in Homily 17, see L. Cirillo, “L’antipaolinismo nelle Pseudoclementine. Un riesame della questione,” in G. Filoramo and C. Gianotto (eds.), *Verus Israel: Nuove prospettive sul giudeocristianesimo. Atti del Colloquio di Torino (4–5 novembre 1999)* (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2001), 280–303; D. Côté, *Le thème de l’opposition entre Pierre et Simon dans les Pseudo-Clémentines* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 167; Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2001); J. Wehnert, “Petrus versus Paulus in den pseudoklementinischen Homilien 17,” in J. Zangenberg and M. Labahn (eds.), *Christians as a Religious Minority in a Multicultural City: Modes of Interaction and Identity Formation in Early Imperial Rome. Studies on the Basis of a Seminar at the Second Conference of the European Association for Biblical Studies (EABS) from July 8–12, 2001, in Rome* (JSNT Supplement; London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 175–185; J. Wehnert, *Pseudoklementinische Homilien: Einführung und Übersetzung* (KAL 1/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 38.

²¹ Mt 18:10.

²² *Ps.-Clement*, Homily 17, 7.2 (ed. B. Rehm and G. Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen I. Homilien* [3rd ed.; GCS 42; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1992], 232.13–17): θεὸν δὲ φοβεῖσθαι

In response, Simon or, respectively, Paul says:

Does God (really) have an *outward form*? Now, if He does, (then) He is (circumscribed) by a shape. And being in a shape, how (can) He avoid being *limited*? And being *limited*, He (must) be in a place. And being in a place, He is less than *the place which limits Him*. And being less than something, how (can) He be bigger or stronger than everything or (be) the Most High?²³

Thus, Simon the Magician *alias* Paul of the *Pseudo-Clementines*, Homily 17 argues in favour of God's unlimitedness in the same way as Narsai makes his Paul do in the *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul'.²⁴ Simon's opponent Peter holds that God is limited by His human form, his position being similar to the second group of Narsai's "heretics."²⁵ Hence, the two touch points between the second group of Narsai's "heretics" and *Pseudo-Clementines*, Homily 17 discussed so far are anti-Paulinism and God's limitedness.

Vision of God and its Context

These parallels appear not to be the only link that connects the two texts. The author of Homily 17 is very much concerned with the question of which kind

ἐκέῖνον εἶπεν, οὗ οἱ ἄγγελοι οἱ τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν ἐλαχίστων πιστῶν ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἐστήκασιν θεωροῦντες τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ πατρὸς διαπαντός· μορφὴν γὰρ ἔχει – διὰ πρῶτον καὶ μόνον κάλλος – καὶ πάντα μέλη, οὐ διὰ χρῆσιν. This peculiar notion has been given some scholarly attention; among the most important publications are Sh. Pines, "Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the Sefer Yezira and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies. The Implications of this Resemblance," *The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Proceedings* 7.3 (1989): 63–141, J. Wehnert, "Das Geheimnis der Siebenzahl". Spekulationen über die unendliche Gestalt Gottes in den pseudoklementinischen Homilien, Buch 16 und 17," in F. Amsler et al. (eds.), *Nouvelles intrigues pseudo-clémentines. Plots in the Pseudo-Clementine Romance: Actes du deuxième colloque international sur la littérature apocryphe chrétienne, Lausanne – Genève, 30 août – 2 septembre 2006* (PIRSB 6; Prahins: Édition du Zébre, 2008), 461–467; D. Côté, "La forme de Dieu dans les *Homélies* pseudo-clémentines et la notion de Shiur Qomah," in G. Aragione and R. Gounelle (eds.), «Soyez des changeurs avisés»: *Controverses exégétiques dans la littérature apocryphe chrétienne* (CBP 12; Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 2012), 69–94; A.Y. Reed, "Rethinking (Jewish-)Christian Evidence for Jewish Mysticism," in R. Boustani, M. Himmelfarb, and P. Schäfer (eds.), *Hekhalot Literature in Context Between Byzantium and Babylonia* (TSAJ 153; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 349–377; C. Marksches, *Gottes Körper. Jüdische, christliche und pagane Gottesvorstellungen in der Antike* (München: C. H. Beck, 2016), 267–283, 629–644. For the history of research, see Côté, "La forme de Dieu," 76–81.

²³ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 3.5–7 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 230.12–16): μορφὴν δὲ ἔχει θεός; εἰ δὲ ἔχει, ἐν σχήματί ἐστιν. ἐν σχήματι δὲ ὢν πῶς οὐ περιόριστος ἐστίν; περιόριστος δὲ ὢν ἐν τόπῳ ἐστίν. ἐν τόπῳ δὲ ὢν ἦττων ἐστίν τοῦ περιέχοντος αὐτὸν τόπου. ἦττων δὲ τίνος ὢν πῶς πάντων ἐστίν ἢ μείζων ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἀνώτατος.

²⁴ See Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' (ed. Mingana 1.84.9–10): "You (i.e., the apostle Paul) taught us that the (Divine) essence is in itself unlimited." See fn. 8 above.

²⁵ See Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' (ed. Mingana 1.85.17–18): "He (i.e., the devil) alienated you (i.e., "heretics") from the study of Paul's word since he saw that he (i.e., Paul) preached the *nature of the Hidden One being not limited*." See fn. 18 above.

of revelation can be considered as sound and free from demonic influences. As in the previous case, his own position is represented by the apostle Peter and the opposite and, from his point of view, wrong one by the apostle Paul. Two passages from Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 8, where he discusses Paul's mystical experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–9) and during his apostolic service (2 Cor 12:1–4), touch upon similar issues. After presenting these two texts I will discuss some parallels from Homily 17 of the *Pseudo-Clementines* and from other texts of Syriac provenience.

Narsai describes Saul's mystical experience on the way to Damascus as follows:

He (i. e., Christ) appeared to His persecutor (i. e., Saul) in great glory as it were in mystery which (is) in the revelation of the consummation (of this world). He (i. e., Christ) showed the mystery of that glory in (his) mind, not by means of (his) visual perception, for the body cannot see that glory by means of (its) organs of sense. It was no (bodily?) substance (that) the bodily pupils (of his eyes) had seen but the mystery of the revealed image of the Hidden One in the heights.²⁶

In 2 Cor 12:1–4, Paul gives an account of his being caught up into Paradise and about hearing there unutterable words. Narsai focuses his comment on the apostle's audible experience, and lets Paul speak for himself:

By means of which organs of sense did you (i. e., Paul) – and you alone – listen to Him as you had been esteemed worthy (to do so)? (...) “Yes”, (Paul says,) “I have heard (Him) and understood His power when hearing. But it is difficult for those (clad) in flesh to hear (Him) as they are. (So), when I heard, I also did not hear by means of (my) fleshly organs of sense but in the mystery of the sound which is possessed by the immortal ones. In the mystery of that voice by means of which they talk, by means of this tool I heard it when I heard, (and) it was not in the body.”²⁷

In the first passage, Narsai stresses that Saul did not see the Lord by means of his physical eyes; rather, the mystery addressed his mind.²⁸ In the last line, Narsai highlights that the object of the vision was “the mystery of the revealed image of the Hidden One in the heights.”²⁹ Taken together with the first line,³⁰ it probably means that Christ appeared to Saul's mind in His human shape accompanied by the Divine splendor.³¹ “Glory” (*šubḥā*) and “mystery” (*[l]rāzā*) are the two most essential characteristics of Paul's vision according to Narsai. He denies that the apostle contemplated the mere bodily substance (*qnomā*) of Christ. In the last

²⁶ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.72.25–73.4).

²⁷ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.81.9.12–16). Cf. 2 Cor 12:1–4.

²⁸ Cf. “He (i. e., Christ) showed the mystery of that glory in (his [i. e., Paul's]) mind, not by means of (his) visual perception, for the body cannot see that glory by means of (its) organs of sense.”

²⁹ The “image of the Hidden One in the heights” is, obviously, God the Son.

³⁰ Cf. “He (i. e., Christ) appeared to His persecutor (i. e., Saul) in great glory / as it were in mystery which <is> in the revelation of the consummation (of this world).”

³¹ Cf. Krüger's remark: “D. h. Christus zeigte sich Saulus als der erhöhte Christus” (“Ein Missionsdokument,” 277 fn. 17).

line, Narsai repeats once again that this mystery could not be perceived by the apostle's fleshly eyes.³² Evidently, the author of the *mēmra* is preoccupied with denying the possibility of the mystical experience through the medium of the human body which addresses the human body of Christ before His ascension. I will say more about the context and meaning of these statements in the next section below.

Narsai proceeds along this line also in the second passage. Here, the emphasis on the intellectual character of Paul's mysticism is reinforced in several ways. First, Narsai places the pertinent words in the apostle's mouth which gives them an additional stress. Second, the apostle's direct speech created by Narsai is not identical with the content of 2 Cor 12:1–4, which it is supposed to summarize. Rather, Narsai puts his own stresses,³³ and he does not shy away from contradicting the text of the Bible directly. Two most evident transformations strengthen Narsai's standpoint concerning the mystical practice. In the first place, though the historical apostle Paul of 2 Cor 12 emphasizes twice (!) that he does not know whether he had made his Paradise journey in the body or out of the body,³⁴ Narsai's Paul is sure that this was *not* in the body.³⁵ Furthermore, he makes the apostle Paul provide an explanation of this utterance. Narsai is convinced that Paul, in order to perceive the sayings in Paradise, was given the audible perception characteristic of angels.³⁶ Since angels are bodiless rational spirits, Narsai's thesis concerning Paul's intellectual mysticism gains a theological foothold.

This repeated pronounced denial of bodily mediation in mystical seeing and hearing is hardly merely traditional. Rather, it seems to presuppose a more or less contemporary target. In the following, I will attempt to provide a Syrian and Mesopotamian context for Narsai's remarks which will elucidate his preoccupation with the issue in question.

The only text contemporary with Narsai which I am going to discuss originates from the pen of Jacob of Serugh. Before dealing with it and Narsai's '*On Peter and Paul*', I would like briefly to touch upon the relevant Syriac and Mesopotamian evidence from the first part of the fourth century. All texts to be presented have in one way or another to do with the notion that God does have a human body and with the scriptural proofs – first of all Gn 1:26–27 and Ezek 1:26 – justifying this notion.

³² Cf. "It was no substance (*qnomā*) (that) the bodily pupils (of his eyes) had seen."

³³ Narsai takes, for instance, for granted that the unutterably sayings heard by Paul in Paradise had been pronounced by God. As a matter of fact, the text of 2 Cor 12:3–4 is far from this unambiguousness.

³⁴ Cf. 2 Cor 12:2–3.

³⁵ Cf. "In the mystery of that voice by means of which they talk, by means of this tool I heard it when I heard, (and) it was *not in the body*."

³⁶ Cf. "(So), when I heard, I also did not hear by means of (my) fleshly organs of sense but in the mystery of the sound which is possessed by the immortal ones (i. e., angels). In the mystery of that voice by means of which they talk, by means of this tool I heard it when I heard."

The most outspoken text among others of this kind is Homily 17 of the *Pseudo-Clementines*, which I have already discussed. Though scholars disagree about the exact time of origin of this text,³⁷ it seems to be the general consensus that it was made available to the general public in Syria within the corpus of the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* at the end of the third or at the very beginning of the fourth century.³⁸

Homily 17 reports about the second day of the disputation between Simon Magus and the apostle Peter held in Laodicea. The controversy starts with Zacchaeus reporting to Peter about Simon's speech given in Peter's absence and providing severe criticism of a number of Peter's theological opinions and possibly also practices.³⁹ The most serious accusation brought by Simon against Peter is the latter's teaching concerning God's outward form (μορφή): "... Peter who seemingly delivers your souls from terrifying shapes (i.e., from the shapes of the idols), (uses) a still more terrifying shape (and) makes the mind of every one of you be possessed (by demons) by introducing God (having) the outward form ..." ⁴⁰ Simon makes clear that the danger he is talking about proceeds from the mental image of God which terrifies the soul (or the mind) and causes its possession by the devil. In his view, one's soul has to be completely free from any kind of mental representations.⁴¹

³⁷ H. Waitz (*Die Pseudoklementinen. Homilien und Rekognitionen: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung* [TUGAL 10.3; Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1904], 99–100) thinks that Homily 17.12–19 was part of the so-called *Periodoi Petrou*, a hypothetical original Pseudo-Clementine novel from the middle of the third century called Basic Writing or *Grundchrift* in the modern scholarly nomenclature. According to B. Rehm ("Zur Entstehung der pseudoclementinischen Schriften," *ZNF* 37 [1938]: 149–150), the passage Homily 17.13–19 is an interpolation. G. Strecker (*Das Judenchristentum in den Pseudoklementinen* [TU 70; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981], 64–65) argues that Homily 17 had been composed by the "Homilist," i.e., the redactor of the 20 Ps.-Clementine Homilies. Wehnert ("Geheimnis," 461) assumes that the notion about God's outward form (μορφή) in the Homilies 16 and 17 belonged to the most ancient literary layer of the Ps.-Clementine tradition which he places in the second century.

³⁸ See Strecker, *Judenchristentum*, 267–268 and J. Wehnert, "Abriss der Entstehungsgeschichte des pseudoklementinischen Romans," *Apocrypha* 3 (1992): 231–232. Speaking about connections between the *Pseudo-Clementines* and Narsai, it is important to say that the *Pseudo-Clementines* were written in Syria (probably in Antioch) and translated into Syriac not later than 411, the date of the earliest Syriac manuscript (ms. Brit. Libr. Add. 12,150 containing *Recognitions* 1–3 and *Homilies* 10–14) (Jones, *The Syriac Pseudo-Clementines*, 39).

³⁹ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 2.1–6.1.

⁴⁰ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 3.3 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 230.4–6): ... Πέτρος φοβερῶν ιδεῶν δοκῶν ἀπαλλάσσειν ὑμῶν τὰς ψυχὰς, φοβερωτέρα ἰδέα τὸν ἐκάστου ὑμῶν ἐνθουσιᾶν ποιεῖ νοῦν, θεὸν ἐν μορφῇ εἰσηγούμενος ...

⁴¹ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 2.5 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 229.20–23): οὐθὲν γὰρ ἕτερον ὠφελῆθῃναι ἔστιν ἢ τὸ τὴν ψυχὴν εἰδώλων παντοδαπῶν ἐλευθέραν γενέσθαι. φανταζομένη γὰρ εἶδος δεσμεῖται φόβῳ, καὶ φροντίδι τοῦ παθεῖν τι μαραίνεται καὶ ἀλλοιούμενη δαιμονῶν καὶ δαιμονῶσα τοῖς πολλοῖς σωφρονεῖν δοκεῖ. "For nothing can be of (more) advantage than the soul set free from all kinds of phantoms. Since, if it imagines (some material) shape, it is bound by fear and dies away because of anticipation of suffering something

From Peter's reaction, we can learn that the subject of Simon's criticism is not only an abstract imagination of God in material form. When defending the notion of God's form, Peter explains that it is essential for prayer:

What a (strong) love (for God) we can attain if we contemplate His outward beauty with (our) mind! ... Yet, some people, foreign to the truth and fighting (against it) side by side with evil, claim on the pretext of the glorification (of God) that He is without form, with the objective that He, being formless and shapeless (according to them), might not be seen by anyone nor much loved. For mind not seeing God is devoid of Him. And how should one pray if he does not have someone to take refuge in (or) lean upon? For, if he does not have a representation (within his mind), he digs himself into the void (when praying).⁴²

Thus, according to the apostle Peter of Ps.-Clementine Homily 17, a mental image (εἶδος) or a mental representation (ἀντιτυπία) of God functions as a focal point toward which one's prayer is directed.⁴³ Without such focus, prayer does not reach God.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the place of this representation is the human

(dreadful). And being confused (in this way), it gets possessed by demons and, when possessed, it seems to most people to be sound of mind."

⁴² Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 10.5–11.2 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 235.5–14): οἶαν οὖν στοργὴν συλλαβεῖν δυνάμεθα, ἐὰν τὴν εὐμορφίαν αὐτοῦ τῷ νῷ κατοπτεύσωμεν. ... τινὲς δὲ τῆς ἀληθείας ἀλλότριοι ὄντες καὶ τῇ κακίᾳ συμμαχοῦντες προφάσει δοξολογίας ἀσχημάτιστον αὐτὸν λέγουσιν, ἵνα ἄμορφος καὶ ἀνείδεος ὢν μηδενὶ ὁρατὸς ᾦ, ὅπως μὴ περιπόθητος γένηται. νοῦς γὰρ εἶδος οὐχ ὁρῶν θεοῦ κενός ἐστιν αὐτοῦ. πῶς δὲ καὶ εὐχεται τις, οὐκ ἔχων πρὸς τίνα καταφύγη, εἰς τίνα ἐρείσῃ; ἀντιτυπίαν γὰρ οὐκ ἔχων εἰς κενὸν ἐκβαθρεύεται.

⁴³ The polemics between Peter and Simon strongly reminds one of the debate between Egyptian monks during the first Origenist controversy at the end of the fourth century. Peter defends views held by the so-called Anthropomorphites and Simon is close to the so-called Origenists. For more details concerning this monastic controversy, see Socrates of Constantinople, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.7.1–29 (ed. G. Ch. Hansen, *Sokrates, Kirchengeschichte* [GCS N.F. 1; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995], 322.7–324.24), Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.11.1–12.12 (ed. J. Bidez, *Sozomenus, Kirchengeschichte* [2nd ed.; GCS N.F. 4; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995], 363.26–366.12), A. Guillaumont, *Les 'Képhalaia gnostica' d'Évagre le Pontique et l'histoire de l'origénisme chez les grecs et chez les syriens* (Patristica Sorbonensia 5; Paris: Du Seuil, 1962), 59–61; G. Gould, "The Image of God and the Anthropomorphite Controversy in Fourth Century Monasticism," in R. J. Daly (ed.), *Origeniana Quinta: Historica – Text and Method – Biblica – Philosophica – Theologica – Origenism and Later Developments: Papers of the 5th International Origen Congress, Boston College, 14–18 August 1989* (BETL 106; Leuven: University Press, 1992), 549–557; D. Bumazhnov, *Der Mensch als Gottes Bild im christlichen Ägypten: Studien zu Gen 1,26 in zwei koptischen Quellen des 4.–5. Jahrhunderts* (STAC 34; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 1–22, 102–103.

⁴⁴ Cf. "For mind not seeing God is devoid of Him" (νοῦς γὰρ εἶδος οὐχ ὁρῶν θεοῦ κενός ἐστιν αὐτοῦ) and "For, if he (i.e., the worshiper) does not have a representation (within his mind), he digs himself into the void (when praying)" (ἀντιτυπίαν γὰρ οὐκ ἔχων εἰς κενὸν ἐκβαθρεύεται). The latter remark provides an intriguing link to the first Origenist controversy, cf. John Cassian, *Conferences of the Desert Fathers*, 10.3. According to this text, the Egyptian monk Sarapion, after being convinced by several theologians that God does not have human form, exclaims: *heu me miserum! Tulerunt a me deum meum, et quem teneam non habeo uel quem adorem aut interpellem iam nescio* "Alas! Woe is me! They have taken from me my God and

mind.⁴⁵ Another passage from Peter's answer to the criticism uttered by Simon demonstrates that the scriptural reference of the teaching about God the Father's outward form is Gn 1:26–27 and Mt 5:8:

Now, it is for the sake of human being that He (i. e., God) has the most beautiful (outward) form so that the pure in heart might be able to see Him⁴⁶ ... For He provided the human being with (His own) impression by means of His outward form (using it) like a most magnificent seal in order that he/she might have dominion and be lord over all things and in order that all might serve him/her.⁴⁷ That is why, if (someone) has decided that He is all reality and the human being is His image⁴⁸ (He Himself is invisible, but His image, the human being, is visible) and if he/she desires to worship Him, he/she honors His visible image, which is human being.⁴⁹

In the second part of Homily 17 (chapters 13–20), the apostle Peter and Simon discuss the most appropriate mode of revelation of the Divine truth. Peter endorses direct revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) flashing up in one's mind in its final form such as his own proclaiming Christ as the Son of the living God recorded in Mt 16:13–17.⁵⁰ The object of Peter's criticism is revelations in form of dreams (ὄνειροι) and supernatural visions (ὀπτασίαι) in the kind of those experienced by the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 9:1–2 and 2 Cor 12:1–5).⁵¹ Peter is of the opinion that Simon's (or, rather, Paul's) visions are a sign of God's anger.⁵² Peter champions direct revelations modelled according to God's conversations with Moses as described in Nm 12:8: "mouth to mouth, in (His own visible) shape, and not in rid-

I have none to adhere to, nor do I know now, whom shall I worship or have recourse to." (ed. E. Pichery, *Jean Cassien, Conférences VIII–XVII* [SC 54; Paris: Cerf, 1958], 77.30–32).

⁴⁵ Cf. "For *mind* not seeing God is devoid of Him." In Homily 17 (16.2), Peter stresses that the eyes of the flesh cannot see the shape of God the Father or His Son: τὴν γὰρ ἄσαρκον ἰδέαν οὐ λέγω δύνασθαι πατρὸς ἢ υἱοῦ ἰδεῖν διὰ τὸ μεγίστῳ φωτὶ καταυγάζεσθαι τοὺς θνητῶν ὀφθαλμούς "So I do not claim that the eyes of the mortal ones are able to see the immaterial shape of the Father or the Son, (which is impossible) because of the illumination by the most powerful light (of the Divine)." (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 238.9–10).

⁴⁶ Cf. Mt 5:8.

⁴⁷ Cf. Gn 1:26: καὶ ἀρχέτωσαν τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς θαλάσσης ... καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς ... (LXX).

⁴⁸ Cf. Gn 1:26: καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς Ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν ... (LXX).

⁴⁹ Cf. Gn 1:26–27. Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 7.4–5 (ed. G. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 232.22–233.1): τὴν δὲ καλλίστην μορφήν ἔχει δι' ἄνθρωπον, ἵνα οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτὸν ἰδεῖν δυνήθωσιν ... τῇ γὰρ αὐτοῦ μορφῇ ὡς ἐν μεγίστῃ σφραγίδι τὸν ἄνθρωπον διειτυπώσατο, ὅπως ἀπάντων ἄρχῃ καὶ κυριεύῃ καὶ πάντα αὐτῷ δουλεύῃ. διὸ κρίνας εἶναι τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ εἰκόνα τὸν ἄνθρωπον (αὐτὸς ἀόρατος, ἡ δὲ αὐτοῦ εἰκὼν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁρατός) ὁ αὐτὸν σέβειν θέλων τὴν ὁρατὴν αὐτοῦ τιμᾶ εἰκόνα, ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος.

⁵⁰ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 17.5–18.1 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 239.4–10).

⁵¹ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 18.2 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 239.10–13). Wehnert ("Petrus versus Paulus," 179) observed that Homily 17.13–20 contains many allusions to Paul's letters which are missing in other parts of the *Pseudo-Clementines*. Though Peter clearly alludes to the apostle Paul's visions and letters (e.g., in Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 19.1–3), his opponent is consequently called Simon.

⁵² Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 18.4–5; 19.1–2 (ed. Rehm and Strecker, *Die Pseudoklementinen*, 239.15–17, 24–27).

dles, visions, and dreams.”⁵³ This discussion reminds one of Narsai’s criticism of bodily mediation in apostle Paul’s mystical experiences referred to above.⁵⁴ Thus, interest in the apostle Paul’s mysticism is one more point Narsai’s *Mēmra* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ and Ps.-Clementine Homily 17 have in common.

Summarizing the evidence of Ps.-Clementine Homily 17, one can state that the notion of God’s human-like outward form seems to be derived from Gn 1:26–27.⁵⁵ On the basis of this peculiar exegesis, the author of the Homily or the tradition he represents developed a practice of prayer which presupposed a mental image of human-like God functioning as a focal point at which the prayer should be directed. This practice had been criticized by those believing that God does not have any form.⁵⁶

A similar notion concerning God’s having human form can be found in the schismatic, probably Jewish-Christian⁵⁷ Syrian group known as Audians.⁵⁸ Audius and the adherents of his teaching said that God’s image from Gn 1:26–

⁵³ Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 18.6: στόμα κατὰ στόμα, ἐν εἶδει καὶ οὐ δι’ αἰνιγμάτων καὶ ὁραμάτων καὶ ἐνυπνίων. Nm 12:8 LXX: στόμα κατὰ στόμα, ἐν εἶδει καὶ οὐ δι’ αἰνιγμάτων. Cf. also Ex 33:11 and Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 18.5.

⁵⁴ See fn. 26 and 27. It is worth mentioning that Peter’s arguments concerning true revelations are somewhat ambiguous. Besides the model of Moses in Nm 12:8, which presupposes direct bodily contact with the Divine, he advocates unmediated revelations in one’s mind. Cf. Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 17.5.

⁵⁵ Peter and Simon started discussing Gn 1:26–27 on the first day of their disputation in Laodicea (Ps.-Clement, Homily 16, 10–11.19).

⁵⁶ Their objection against using a mental image of God in prayer was that this practice opened a door for demonic attacks on its adherents, see Ps.-Clement, Homily 17, 2.5: “For nothing can be of (more) advantage than the soul set free from all kinds of phantoms. Since, if it imagines (some material) shape, it is bound by fear and dies away because of anticipation of suffering something (dreadful). And being confused (in this way), it gets possessed by demons ...” See fn. 41 above for the Greek text.

⁵⁷ See G. G. Stroumsa, “Jewish and Gnostic Traditions among the Audians,” in A. Kofsky and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Sharing the Sacred. Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, First–Fifteenth Centuries CE* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben Zvi, 1998), 98: “In some ways, they (i.e., Audians) appear to have been close to Gnostic groups, while other traits of their teachings ... recall certain Jewish-Christian doctrines.” Among the latter was celebration of the Passover with Jews (cf. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 70.9.2–4). Defending this liturgical tradition, the Audians quoted an otherwise unknown passage from the *Didascalia apostolorum* saying: “... celebrate when your brethren of (ἐκ) the circumcision do.” (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 70.10.2; trans. F. Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III [Sects 47–80, De Fide]* [NHMS 36; Leiden: Brill, 1994], 412).

⁵⁸ The group is called after its founder Audius (Ἀὐδαῖος, Syr. ‘wdy) originating from Edessa and was spread over Syria and Mesopotamia starting from the early fourth century. The best description of the Audians is provided by H.-C. Puech, “Audianer,” in RAC, 1.910–915. Cf. also J. Jarry, “Une semi hérésie syro-égyptienne: L’audianisme,” *BIFAO* 63 (1965): 169–195; Stroumsa, “Jewish and Gnostic Traditions,” 97–108; D. Weisser, *Quis maritus salvetur? Untersuchungen zur Radikalisierung des Jungfräulichkeitsideals im 4. Jahrhundert* (PTS 70; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 158–163.

27 applies to the human body⁵⁹ and consequently deduced that God Himself has bodily shape.⁶⁰ Our sources do not transmit direct evidence that Audians used the notion of God's human body in prayer or were engaged in any kind of mystical activities though it is not improbable.⁶¹ The testimonies of Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. 466), Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523), and Theodoros bar Koni (second part of the eighth century)⁶² make almost sure that, in the time of Narsai, the Audians still existed.

The last group of texts to be mentioned in connection with the anthropomorphic notion and vision of God in Syria before turning to the time of Narsai is written by Eusebius of Emessa,⁶³ who is the author of six (!) sermons insisting on God's incorporeality and invisibility.⁶⁴ Eusebius' sermons bear witness that,

⁵⁹ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 70.2.4–5: "For he (i.e., Audius) and his adherents stubbornly declare that the gift of being in his image which God granted Adam applies to his body, because ... of the literal wording of 'Let us make man in our image and after our likeness'. And then the word of God adds, 'And God took dust of the earth and made man'. 'Since scripture has said (that God made) man from the earth', says Audius, 'see how it has said with perfect truth that the entire earthly part is man'. Therefore it said earlier that the earthly part of man will itself be in the image of God.'" (trans. Williams, *The Panarion*, 404).

⁶⁰ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.10.2: πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ ἀνοήτως νενοηκώς τὸ «ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ κατ' ὁμοίωσιν», ἀνθρωπεῖαν ἔχειν μορφήν τὸ θεῖον ὑπέλαβε ... "Firstly, he (i.e., Audius) had understood the words 'Let us make man after our image and after (our) likeness' (Gn 1:26) ignorantly (and) assumed that God had human shape" (ed. L. Parmentier, *Theodoret, Kirchengeschichte* [2nd ed.; GCS 44; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1954], 228.4–6).

⁶¹ Theodoros bar Koni, *Scholion*, 11.63 testifies that, according to Audius, God does have "outward appearance of a human" (Syr. [ʾnšāyā ʾhezwā] (ed. A. Scher, *Theodoros bar Kōnī, Liber scholiorum, pars posterior* (CSCO 69; Leuven: Peeters, 1912), 319.25). This and the fact that the Audians "received revelations" (Philoxenos of Mabbug, *Letter to All Orthodox Monks in Orient* [ed. J. Lebon, "Textes inédits de Philoxène de Mabbug," *Le Muséon* 43 [1930]: 200.19) as well as intensively used and probably also produced apocalyptic literature (cf. Theodoros bar Koni, *Scholion*, 11.63 [ed. Scher, *Theodoros bar Kōnī*, 319.22; 319.29–320.26]), which presupposes a certain openness for visions, make their own visionary activities quite possible. On the other hand, we have ample evidence concerning Syriac Messalians testifying that they were eager to contemplate the Holy Trinity with the eyes of the body, see K. Fitschen, *Messalianismus und Antimessealianismus: Ein Beispiel ostkirchlicher Ketzergeschichte* (FKDG 71; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 66, 296.

⁶² See fn. 60 and 61 above.

⁶³ Eusebius was born ca. 300 in Edessa. In about the middle of the forties of the fourth century he had been ordained bishop of Emessa (today Ḥomṣ in Western Syria; for the date of consecration see É. M. Buytaert, *L'héritage littéraire d'Eusèbe d'Émèse: Étude critique et historique, textes* [BM 24; Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1949], 81 fn. 164) but apparently spent much time in Antioch afterwards (R. B. ter Haar Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress: The Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis* [TEG 6; Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 9). He died ca. 359 (Buytaert, *L'héritage littéraire*, 94–95).

⁶⁴ Cf. *Sermon 20 On God Being Incorporeal and Invisible* (*De Incorporali et invisibili Deo*) and *Sermons 21–25 On the Incorporeal One* (*De Incorporali*). Latin translation of the Greek original are edited in É. M. Buytaert, *Eusèbe d'Émèse, Discours conservés en latin, textes en partie inédits*, vol. 2. *La Collection de Sirmond* (*Discours XVIII à XXIX*) (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense Administration, 1957), 79–174.

in the middle of the fourth century, these questions were highly controversial in western Syria. Christoph Marksches suggests that Eusebius has in view a less educated Christian audience which did not completely detach itself from the pagan cults.⁶⁵ It can, however, not be excluded that part of Eusebius' listeners based its understanding of God being corporeal and visible on the biblical anthropomorphisms. At least, Eusebius' exegesis of Gn 1:26 clearly presupposes an alternative explanation which, judging from the general context of a sermon on God's incorporeality and invisibility, should have connected the image of God with the human body.⁶⁶

Based on the evidence discussed above, one can conclude that in Syria and Mesopotamia in the fourth and fifth centuries the notion that God has a human form was relatively widespread. Its proponents appealed to Gn 1:26–27 as scriptural proof for their view and, in some cases, developed spiritual practices in which an anthropomorphic image of God played a certain role.

Against this background is to be seen the *mēmra* of Jacob of Serugh 'On the Chariot that Prophet Ezekiel Saw'. Jacob (d. ca. 521) was a student at the School of Edessa by the late sixties or early seventies of the fifth century,⁶⁷ when Narsai was director of the School,⁶⁸ a fact important for establishing a common milieu of the two Syriac poets. A number of late hagiographical sources mention the *mēmra* 'On the Chariot' as being spoken by the 22 years old Jacob in the presence of several bishops who intended to verify the orthodoxy of his teaching.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Marksches, *Gottes Körper*, 297. In Sermon 24 *On the Incorporeal One*, 4.33 (ed. Buytaert, *Eusèbe d'Émèse*, 152.4–12), Eusebius mentions a god appearing as a swan and another worshiped as a bull. See also Eusebius of Emessa, Sermon 25 *On the Incorporeal One*, 5.3.

⁶⁶ Cf. Eusebius of Emessa, Sermon 20 *On God Being Incorporeal and Invisible*, 5: *et accipitur secundum imaginem non aliud nisi quia, rege Deo omnibus constituto, rex fiet et homo eorum quae supra terram sunt*. "And the acceptable meaning (of the words) 'after (our) image' (Gn 1:26) is none other than (the following:) because it is established that God is the King of all (things), likewise the human being becomes the king of (all) on earth." (Latin text is possibly damaged, translation ad sensum; quotation according to Buytaert, *Eusèbe d'Émèse*, 81.24–26).

⁶⁷ Jacob mentions that he studied at Edessa at this time in his *Letter 14* (ed. G. Olinder, *Iacobi Sarugensis Epistulae quotquot supersunt* [CSCO 110; Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1937], 58.21–24) but does not associate his studies with the School of Edessa directly which is quite understandable because of the dyophysite reputation of the School. Jacob's affiliation with the School is witnessed by *The Chronicle of Siirt* (ed. A. Scher, *Histoire nestorienne [Chronique de Séert]*, Part 2, Fasc. 1 [PO 7.2; Paris: Herder, 1911], 121.5–6) and the *Kitāb al-majdal* by Mārī ibn Sulaymān (ed. H. Gismondi, *Maris Amri et Slibae De patriarchis Nestorianorum commentaria ex codicibus Vaticanis, Pars Prior, Maris textus Arabicus* [Rome: De Luigi, 1899], 44.7–8). For the date of Jacob's presence at the School of Edessa, see P.M. Forness, *Preaching Christology in the Roman Near East: A Study of Jacob of Serugh* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

⁶⁸ Narsai's "directorship ... probably did not begin before ca. 450" (Van Rompay, "Narsai," in *GEDSH*, 303).

⁶⁹ Cf. Grigorios bar 'Ebroyo, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* (ed. J.B. Abbelos and T.J. Lamy, *Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* [Leuven: Peeters, 1872], 191.3–13); a Panegyric of an unknown author transmitted in ms. Paris, Syr. 177 from 1521 (P. Krüger, "Ein bislang

Though the matter needs further investigation, this tradition does not seem to be completely reliable.⁷⁰ Since Jacob's *mēmṛā* 'On the Chariot' had been recently studied by Alexander Golitzin,⁷¹ I will start with summarizing some of Golitzin's observations relevant for the present study.

Golitzin remarks that "(t)he very fact that Jacob devoted a homily, and a very long one at that, to Ezekiel's chariot vision puts him at least in rough parallel with the contemporary, Jewish mysticism of the *merkavah*, the divine throne ..."⁷² However, different from the *Merkavah* mystics, "Jacob ... writes precisely *against* the possibility or necessity of the 'ascent to heaven'."⁷³ In the *mēmṛā*, we find "an express prohibition directed against a mysticism of ascent to the divine chariot"⁷⁴ ... The prohibition against making a heavenly journey suggests to me that some of Jacob's audience were interested in doing just that."⁷⁵

unbekannter sermo über Leben und Werk des Jakob von Serugh," OC 56 [1972]: 85.16–87.16 [Syriac text], 100–102 [German translation]); and a short hagiographic notice taken from ms. Vatican, Syr. 37, dated 1626/7 (ed. J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, vol. 1. *De Scriptoribus Syris Orthodoxis* [Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis, 1719], 287.7–289.4; trans. S. P. Brock, "Jacob of Serugh: A Select Bibliographical Guide," in G. A. Kiraz [ed.], *Jacob of Serugh and His Times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* [GECS 8; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010], 238).

⁷⁰ According to the sources mentioned in the previous footnote, in the middle of his sermon, Jacob suddenly feels inspired to change the topic and to speak about the siege and massacre of Amida by the Persians which first embarrasses the listeners and then proves to be a revelation concerning the actual events reported later by the eyewitnesses. Given that Amida was taken in 503 (see Procopius of Caesarea, *Persian War*, 1.7.12–32; ed. J. Henderson, *Procopius, History of the Wars, Books I–II with an English Translation* by H. B. Dewing [LCL 48; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914], 52–58), Jacob, who was born ca. 451, should have been at this time about 50 years old and not just in the beginning of his career.

⁷¹ Cf. A. Golitzin, "The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Serug's Homily 'On that Chariot that Ezekiel the Prophet Saw'," VTQ 47 (2003): 323–364 (reprinted in *Scrinium. Revue de patrologie, d'hagiographie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique* 3 [2007]: 180–212; quotations according to the first publication) and A. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily on the Chariot that Prophet Ezekiel Saw* (Metrical Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug 14; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016).

⁷² Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 329. This point had been made *en passant* by R. C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 137. The Hebrew noun *merkavah* (מרכבה) relates to the Throne-Chariot of God. Though this word is not used in the so-called vision of God by Ezekiel (Ezek 1), it is closely associated with the rabbinic exegesis of Ezek 1 and a Jewish mystical tradition inspired by Ezekiel's vision and dating from between the Roman Imperial Period and the time around 1000. For a general introduction to the topic, see P. Schäfer, *The Origin of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 175–242, Marksches, *Gottes Körper*, 179–201, and P. Piovanelli, "Pratiques rituelles ou exégèse scripturaire? Origines et nature de la mystique de la *Merkava*," in *Apocryphités: Études sur les textes et les traditions scripturaires du judaïsme et du christianisme anciens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 247–268.

⁷³ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 329 (emphasis by the author).

⁷⁴ Cf. Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.606.3; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 138): "Do not look for Him on high, O Sinner, when you are seeking."

⁷⁵ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 354.

Golitzin does not exclude that among Jacob's listener there were some "occasional" Jews.⁷⁶ In a polemical section addressed to an unnamed Jew,⁷⁷ Golitzin thinks that he was able to identify "allusions to the traditions attaching to the mystical vision of the body of God in rabbinic circles, the *shi'ur* (sic) *qomah*, or 'measurements of the stature (of) the divine body', texts which are associated with the *merkavah* literature."⁷⁸ But, according to Golitzin, Jacob did not polemicize exclusively against "Jewish exegesis and mysticism."⁷⁹ Rather, "his remarks were also (or even primarily?) directed to some among his Christian audience who may well have been tempted by – or, more accurately, who had never abandoned and continued to affirm – an anthropomorphic understanding of the divine form, as well as mysticism of ascent similar to the *merkavah* lore."⁸⁰

Jacob advises those Christians to seek Christ not on the heavenly Chariot⁸¹ but in the Eucharist:

Let us find joy with Him from His table, and let no one make inquiry into Him. Do not attach your intellect to the chariot to speak about (it), it is not to be spoken of by you: what have you indeed got to do with hidden matters?⁸²

...

The altar is arranged, instead of the chariot of heavenly beings, and borne (solemnly) upon it is He with whose glory the heavens are filled.⁸³

With regard to Ezekiel's vision of a human on the Chariot,⁸⁴ Jacob emphasizes that this image relates to God incarnate.⁸⁵ Golitzin sees here a "correction of

⁷⁶ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 346.

⁷⁷ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.587.12–590.21; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 103.931–108.1002).

⁷⁸ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 344. *Shi'ur Qomah* (שיעור קומה) means literally "measure of the (Divine) body" and designates "the enigmatic tradition of God's gigantic body dimensions and the names attached to them" (Schäfer, *Jewish Mysticism*, 306). Minor and major *Shi'ur Qomah* texts are part of the so-called *Hekhalot* (היכלות, palaces) literature, a term that alludes to the seven heavenly palaces through which the *Merkavah* mystics ascend to the throne of God. For more about the *Hekhalot* tradition, see R. Elior, "The *Merkavah* Tradition and the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism: From Temple to *Merkavah*, from *Hekhal* to *Hekhalot*, from Priestly Opposition to Gazing upon the *Merkavah*," in A. Oppenheimer (ed.), *Sino-Judaica: Jews and Chinese in Historical Dialogue. An International Colloquium, Nanjing, 11–19 October 1996* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 101–158 and Schäfer, *Jewish Mysticism*, 243–306. About *Shi'ur Qomah*, see Schäfer, *Jewish Mysticism*, 306–315 with further references to the sources and secondary literature.

⁷⁹ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 351.

⁸⁰ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 351.

⁸¹ Jacob understands the human being on the Chariot in Ezek 1:26 as prophecy representing the future incarnation of the Son of God; see Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan, 4.589.5–16; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 107.965–976).

⁸² Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.607.8–10; Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 143.1340–1342; trans., with small changes, Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 142).

⁸³ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.608.10–11; Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 145.1363–1364; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 144).

⁸⁴ Ezek 1:26.

⁸⁵ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.589.13–14; Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's*

the *merkabāh* and *shi'ur* (*sic*) *qomah* traditions. The divine body is certainly a reality, but it is the body of the Word made flesh, who is also, however, and precisely as incarnate, the prototype of Adam.⁸⁶ Leaving aside the polemic with the Jews,⁸⁷ one can, expanding Golitzin's previous thesis,⁸⁸ add that this correction might likewise be applied to the Christian notions concerning the body of God the Father evidenced in Syria and Mesopotamia.⁸⁹ It is in this latter sense that I would like to develop some of Golitzin's suggestions and connect them with Narsai.

Trying to convince his Jewish interlocutor that God has a Son and that it was He that Ezekiel saw on the Chariot, Jacob alludes to Gn 1:26:

- 1013 Before created things, the Father had drawn the image (*ṣalmā*) of His Son,
 1014 and depicted Him, and showed Him how He would shine forth on all on earth.
 1015 The Father gazed at the image (*ṣalmā*) of His Son and molded Adam;⁹⁰
 1016 since He (i. e., the Son) was going to go to the world, He (i. e., the Father)
 delineated Him beforehand.
 1017 For this cause He said, "Let us make man in our image (*bṣalman*),"⁹¹
 1018 in this same likeness (*dmuṭā*) in which Mary gave birth to the Only (Son of God).
 1019 The Father willed to send Him into the world as a man,
 1020 and drew beforehand His form (*ṣurtēh*), the Great Image (*ṣalmā*), in Adam.
 1021 And Ezekiel saw the likeness (*dmuṭā*) on the chariot⁹²
 1022 as a man higher than the summit of the heavens.⁹³

According to this passage, before the creation of the world, the Father having in view the coming incarnation (ln. 1016, 1019–1020), produced an image (*ṣalmā*) of the Son depicting Him as human (ln. 1013, 1015, and 1020). Subsequently, using this pre-incarnate image of Christ as prototype (ln. 1016 and 1018), the Father

Homily, 107.973–974; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 106): "And it is for this that the Chariot came down to the earth: that through prophecy it might represent the descent of its Lord."

⁸⁶ Golitzin, "The Image and Glory," 348.

⁸⁷ Which is certainly present in the *mēmṛā*, see Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā 'On the Chariot'* (ed. Bedjan 4.588.5–15; Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 105.945–955; trans. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 104), where Jacob rebukes his imaginary Jewish counterpart for rejecting Christian explanation of Ezek 1:26. If, Jacob argues, the Jew does not agree that the human on the Chariot is the Son of God, the natural conclusion would be that Ezekiel saw the Father. About Jacob's anti-Jewish polemic in this *mēmṛā*, see A. H. Becker, "L'antijudaïsme syriaque: Entre polémique et critique interne," in F. Ruani (ed.), *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque* (Études syriaques 13; Paris: Geuthner, 2016), 194–196.

⁸⁸ See fn. 80 above.

⁸⁹ Cf. the evidence from Ps.-Clementines and Eusebius of Emessa, as well as from various sources about the Audians, see pp. 50–55 above.

⁹⁰ Gn 2:7.

⁹¹ Gn 1:26.

⁹² Ezek 1:26.

⁹³ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā 'On the Chariot'* (Bedjan 4.591.11–20; Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 111.1013–112.1022; trans., with small changes, Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug's Homily*, 110–112).

created the outward form of Adam (In. 1015, 1017, 1020, and Gn 2:7). It was this image that Ezekiel saw on the Chariot (In. 1021–1022).

When introducing the pre-incarnate image of Christ in his theological discourse, Jacob seems to pursue several aims. On the one hand, he makes a point in his polemics against the Jews in favor of Christian dogmatics.⁹⁴ Following Jacob's exegesis, the human image in Gn 1:26 and Ezek 1:26 provides scriptural witnesses that God has a Son.⁹⁵ On the other hand, Jacob seems to aim at Jewish and Christian mystics seeking God in human form in heaven. In this case, he admits that the human body of God can be deduced from Gn 1:26 and Ezek 1:26 and does really exist. This heavenly body is, however, not the body of the Father as those mystics thought but the pre-incarnate image of the body of Christ.⁹⁶

Turning back to the mystical experiences of the apostle Paul in *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' by Narsai, one notices that Narsai insists on Paul's contemplating not the body of Christ incarnate, but "the mystery of the revealed image of the Hidden One in the heights."⁹⁷ As it seems, the "revealed image (*ṣalmā*) of the Hidden One" may well be equivalent to the pre-incarnate image of Christ Jacob speaks about.⁹⁸ Thus, Narsai criticizes those holding that God is limited which can be applied to the proponents of God's visible human form as derived from Gn 1:26,⁹⁹ and he seems to be engaged in some sort of polemic concerning the right mysticism of Christ,¹⁰⁰ which might have been related to the controversy about the Divine body. The second point Narsai vigorously makes in connection with the mysticism of Christ is that all mystical experiences are to be made not in or through the body.¹⁰¹

Summing up the observations in this section, we can state that, first, the group of "heretics" in Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' does not seem homogenous: apart from Miaphysites and/or Chalcedonians it includes people who believed that God was in some sense limited, an opinion hardly compatible

⁹⁴ See fn. 87 above.

⁹⁵ Compare the same line of argumentation in Jacob's *First Mēmṛā Against the Jews*: Adam had been created after the pre-incarnate image of the Son which proves that God does have a Son (M. Albert, *Jacques de Saroug. Homélie contre les juifs* [PO 38.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1976], 44.17–48.62).

⁹⁶ See fn. 87 above.

⁹⁷ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 'On Peter and Paul' (ed. Mingana 1.72.25–73.4).

⁹⁸ Narsai associates the image of God from Gn 1:26 with the body of Christ in a way similar to Jacob of Serugh; see *Mēmṛā* 62 'On Creation III' (Gignoux 602.293–299). See also F. G. McLeod, "Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai," *TS* 42 (1981): 461 and T. Hainthaler, "Colossians 1:15 in the Christological Reflections of East Syrian Authors," *SP* 92 (2017): 169–170.

⁹⁹ See fn. 8 and fn. 9 and pp. 43–47 above.

¹⁰⁰ See John Cassian, *Conferences*, 10.6.1 (ed. É. Pichery, *Jean Cassien, Conférences VIII–XVII* [SC 54; Paris: Cerf, 1958], 79–80) where Cassian juxtaposes two kinds of contemplating Christ: in His humility and in the flesh, on the one hand, and glorified and in the glory of His Majesty, on the other.

¹⁰¹ See fn. 26 and fn. 27 above.

with classical Miaphysite or Chalcedonian theology. Second, in *Homily 17* of the Jewish-Christian *Pseudo-Clementines*, the bodily limitedness of God is defended against the apostle Paul which is an exact parallel to the “heretics” of Narsai.¹⁰² The third common point between Narsai’s ‘*On Peter and Paul*’ and *Ps.-Clementine Homily 17* is polemic against a certain kind of Pauline mysticism.¹⁰³ In this polemic, Narsai uses terminology and ideas which Jacob of Serugh deploys against mysticism of the anthropomorphic body of God. Apparently, Jacob and Narsai, both being engaged in this sort of polemic, had shared concerns.

Admittedly, the picture of those of Narsai’s “heretics” who were different from the Miaphysites and Chalcedonians is blurred. The next section shall hopefully provide some clarity about this enigmatic group.

The Deniers of Biblical Studies

The most prominent feature of the second group against which Narsai argues is, as I said before, its lacking motivation to read the Holy Scripture and especially the apostle Paul.¹⁰⁴ Narsai is seriously preoccupied with these people and combats them vigorously. He makes clear that the group in question did not appear in the time of the apostles;¹⁰⁵ as it seems, they are a phenomenon of the present time. They hated the teaching of the apostles and loved false doctrine (*zēḥpā*).¹⁰⁶ The names of the apostle Paul and his fellow apostles are rejected, everyone extols the false teachers (*pālē d-zēḥpā*),¹⁰⁷ and deception took root in the minds of the fools.¹⁰⁸ In the following lines Narsai concentrates on the reserved attitude towards the study of the Holy Scripture on the part of his opponents:

¹ If anyone repeats a word of Paul or Christ, its sound (appears) foreign and it finds no acceptance in the ears of the stubborn. ² They have much hated the study of the written words and working on it is considered as superfluous by the insolent.

³ “Too much thinking over (God’s) glorious things is not good,”¹⁰⁹ (they say), “lest the heart goes astray through the study of the words of the (Holy) Spirit. ⁴ Inquiry (into texts) produces (*literally* teaches) working on words (which) makes the soul roam, and the mind becomes drunk with refutations in the same way as with wine.” ⁵ Again, the wise proclaims: “Do not eat too much honey.”¹¹⁰ “Behold,” (they say), “he made manifest that you should not covet writings. ⁶ And the servant who knows his master’s will and did not

¹⁰² See pp. 43–47 above.

¹⁰³ See fn. 51–54 above.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. pp. 43–60 above.

¹⁰⁵ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.4–7).

¹⁰⁶ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.7–8).

¹⁰⁷ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.8–9).

¹⁰⁸ Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.10–11).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Prv 25:27b.

¹¹⁰ Prv 25:27a, cf. Prv 25:16.

get ready will be beaten (and receive) severe punishment from him, for he knew (what to do) and refused (obedience).¹¹¹

⁷ Behold, the teaching of the master (became) stupidity among his pupils, (of the master) who painted the letters and taught them (i.e., his pupils) to read from Tau till Alaph. ⁸ Lo! The interpretation of the teacher of writing¹¹² (turned out to be) treacherous for his listeners since it obscured (for) them the knowledge of the word of life. ⁹ Behold, (this is) the bitter poison of the Murderer¹¹³ which he poured into human beings and led them astray, away from the way of the words of the (Holy) Spirit ... ¹⁰ He poured fear (into the souls of human beings) and scared them off from learning, (saying:) “Do not walk in the way of books lest you go astray ...”

¹¹ You¹¹⁴ speak through us so that we repeat your (words) for the wrongdoers who did you much wrong by way of calumny of their blasphemies ... ¹² Do not blame falsely the building of his¹¹⁵ words which is bound together with the power of the (Holy) Spirit and is wisely built ... ¹³ He¹¹⁶ will denounce you for treating the work of his¹¹⁷ love unjustly, since he took a stand in the battle and won and granted victory for his fellow-combatant. ¹⁴ Aren’t stupid those people who are very slow in understanding easy (things)? What light is (as) beautiful during its dawning as the name of Paul? ¹⁵ What way is so easy to go as (the way of) his writings? And who is wearied on the path of his sweet words?¹¹⁸

The text can be divided in four parts:

- a. 1–2 Aversion of the “deniers” to the study of the Bible, especially to the words of Jesus¹¹⁹ and the apostle Paul
- b. 3–6 Arguments of the “deniers”
- c. 7–10 Narsai’s refutation of the arguments
- d. 11–15 The role of the apostle Paul

The most interesting part is b. Obviously, the “deniers” used Prv 25:16, 27¹²⁰ in order to justify their refusal to spend time reading and discussing the Bible. Remarkably enough, this biblical verse is virtually absent from early Christian

¹¹¹ Lk 12:47.

¹¹² Syr. *sāprā*, usually “scribe” or “teacher of the law” (see M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann’s Lexicon Syriacum* [Winona Lake/Piscataway: Eisenbrauns/Gorgias Press, 2009], s. v. and W. Jennings, *Lexicon to the Syriac New Testament [Peshitta] with Copious References, Dictions, Names of Persons and Places and Some Various Readings Found in the Curetonian, Sinaitic Palimpsest, Philoxenian & Other Mss.* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926] s. v.). The meaning “teacher of writing” is possible in the school context, see A. Vööbus, *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis* (PETSE 12; Stockholm: ETSE, [ca. 1962]), 60 fn. 42. Cf. also *bēt seprē* “school.”

¹¹³ I.e., the devil.

¹¹⁴ I.e., the apostle Paul.

¹¹⁵ I.e., apostle Paul’s.

¹¹⁶ I.e., the Holy Spirit.

¹¹⁷ I.e., apostle Paul’s.

¹¹⁸ Narsai, *Mēmra* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.86.11–21; 1.87.3–4, 12–13, 16–20).

¹¹⁹ Narsai mentions Jesus only here probably to give additional weight to his criticism.

¹²⁰ See ln. 3 and 5. Prv 25:16 reads in the Peshitta: “If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it.” Prv 25:27 reads in the Peshitta: “It is not good to eat much honey, nor (is it good) to examine glorious words.” The “deniers” refer to Prv 25:27b in ln. 3 and to Prv 25:27a and Prv 25:16 in ln. 5.

literature. Prv 25:16 and Prv 25:27 are only cited in a few texts to my knowledge, and in only one of them is an explanation offered: in Origen's second Homily on the book of Isaiah.¹²¹ Origen understands "honey" as a reference to the Holy Scripture but does not say anything about the warning against eating too much of it.¹²²

The late Jewish Midrash on Psalms (ninth century?) likewise establishes a connection between honey and the Torah in Prv 25:16, but there is not any attempt to explain the prohibition.¹²³

A parallel to the understanding of Prv 25:16, 27 transmitted by Narsai is, however, to be found in the collection of Jewish oral law intended to supplement the Mishnah and known as Tosefta.¹²⁴ This text has a number of parallels in the rabbinic literature.¹²⁵ Alon Goshen Gottstein considers the Tosefta version as the best and original one.¹²⁶ Following Goshen Gottstein in his analysis of the text in question, I will likewise base myself upon the Tosefta:

- 2:3 A. Four entered the garden: Ben 'Azzai, Ben Zoma, the Other (Elisha), and 'Aqiba.
- B. One gazed and perished, one gazed and was smitten, one gazed and cut down the sprouts, and one went up in peace and came down in peace.
- C. Ben 'Azzai gazed and perished.

¹²¹ For two texts without explanation, see Pseudo-Origen, *Homily on Psalm 38:11* (Vulgata) (ed. PG 12.1407B) and Eliya of al-Anbar (tenth century), *Book of Exercise, Mēmra* 1.3, 10 (ed. A. Juckel, *Der Ktābā d-durrāšā [Ktābā d-mā'wātā] des Elijā von Anbār* [CSCO 559; Leuven: Peeters, 1996], 30.4–6). More quotations are discussed in D.F. Bumazhnov, "Do not eat too much honey!" Jewish and Christian Mystical Readings of Prv 25:16.27," paper given at the Eighth North American Syriac Symposium, Brown University, June 2019, forthcoming.

¹²² Origen, *Homily on Isaiah*, 2.2 (Latin translation from the lost Greek text ed. W.A. Baehrens, *Origenes Werke*, vol. 8. *Homilien zu Samuel I, zum Hohelied und zu den Propheten, Kommentar zum Hohelied in Rufins und Hieronymus' Übersetzungen* [GCS 33; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1925], 251.10–19). An understanding of Prv 25:16, 27 similar to the one presented by Narsai can be found in the relatively late Syriac author Isaac of Nineveh, I 4 (ed. P. Bedjan, *Mar Isaacus Ninivita, De Perfectione Religiosa* [Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1909], 50.15–51.16). This text is analysed in Bumazhnov, "Do not eat too much honey!"

¹²³ "For they are ever with me (Ps 119:98). What is meant by *They are ever with me*? That I did not occupy myself with other books, but only with the Torah. As Solomon said: *Of making many books is no end* (Eccl 12:12), but he also said: *Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee* (Prv 25:16). The Torah is like a jug full of honey. When a quarter of a *lōg* of water is poured into a jug full of honey, a quarter of a *lōg* of honey will be forced out. So with the words of Torah. When you admit other words into your heart, then the words of Torah will be forced out." (ed. S. Buber, *Midrasch Tehilim [Schocher Tob], Sammlung agadischer Abhandlungen über die 150 Psalmen* [Vilna: Wittve & Gebrüder Romm, 1891], 498; trans. W.G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms*, vol. 2 [YJS 13; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959], 274).

¹²⁴ The exact relationship between Mishna and Tosefta is complex and disputed, see G. Stemmer, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (8th ed.; München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 156–159. J. Neusner, *The Tosefta. An Introduction* (SFSHJ 47; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 1 dates the Tosefta between 200 and 300.

¹²⁵ For an overview of the versions and their differences, see D.J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (AOS 62; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980), 86–87.

¹²⁶ A. Goshen Gottstein, "Four Entered Paradise Revisited," *HTR* 88 (1995): 74.

- According to Goshen Gottstein,¹²⁸ the parallel text of the Mishnah, upon which the Tosefta comments, is crucial for the right understanding of the latter:

This Mishnah passage clearly focuses upon two main subjects: restrictions in studying some “dangerous” places of the Holy Scripture (account of Creation, Divine Chariot, etc.),¹³⁰ and strict prohibition of visual activities of certain kind.¹³¹ The first two sections of the second chapter of Tosefta *Hagigah* deal with the first issue of Mishnah: the right way of discussing the Divine Throne-Chariot from Ezek 1.¹³² The point here is that one has to speculate upon this theme only in the presence of one’s teacher. Tosefta *Hagigah* 2:2 (the section just before our text about the four in the garden) states that it was rabbi Aqiba who did it in the right

¹²⁸ Goshen Gottstein, "Paradise," 74–75.

¹³⁰ See Mishnah, *Hagigah* 2.1: "One does not explain sexual aberrations to three (persons), nor the Creation to two, nor the Chariot to one."

¹³¹ See Mishnah, *Hagigah* 2.1: "Anybody looking (כל-המסתכל part. Hithpa. of סכל, "to look at") into four things it would have been better for him not to have come into the world."

¹³² Tosefta, *Hagigah* 2:1–2 (ed. Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 380.1–381.15; trans. Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 312).

way: He gained his knowledge about the Chariot from his teacher R. Joshua, discussed this matter before him, and transmitted the right way of discussion to his own pupil R. Hananiah b. Kinai.¹³³ Goshen Gottstein argues that, precisely for this reason, Aqiba was not harmed in the orchard (tHag 2:3).¹³⁴ Remarkably enough, Aqiba is the only one from the four about whom it is not said that he did look, being in the garden. Tosefta *Hagiga* 2:3 simply says: “R. Aqiba went up in peace and came down in peace.” All three other sages are reported to have looked.¹³⁵

It is in this light that one should see the quotation of Prv 25:16 applied to Ben Zoma.¹³⁶ Obviously, the honey from which he has eaten too much is the forbidden visual activity possibly connected with the Divine Chariot mentioned and discussed in Tosefta *Hagiga* 2.1–2 and in the Mishnah. The general context of the chapter 2 of the treatise *Hagigah* in the Mishnah and Tosefta suggests, however, that, beside wrong mystical practice (i.e., visual activity), the fault of the three sages might have been also the wrong way of reading the Holy Scripture passages about the Divine Chariot.¹³⁷

This connection between reading the Holy Scripture *and* mystical visual activities found in the treatise *Hagigah* 2 in the Mishnah and Tosefta brings us back to Narsai and the “deniers” of biblical studies he polemicizes against.

The first point to be made is that the “deniers” were especially cautious with regard to the writings of the apostle Paul. It is suggested both by the general context and by lines 1, 11–15:

¹ If anyone repeats a *word of Paul* or Christ, its sound (appears) foreign and it finds no acceptance in the ears of the stubborn ... ¹¹ *You* (i.e., the apostle Paul) speak through us so that we repeat *your (words)* for the wrongdoers who did *you* much wrong by way of calumny of their blasphemies ... ¹² Do not blame falsely the building of *his* (i.e., apostle Paul’s) *words* which is bound together with the power of the (Holy) Spirit and is wisely built ... ¹³ *He* (i.e., the Holy Spirit) will denounce you for treating the work of *his* (i.e., Paul’s) *love* unjustly, since he took a stand in the battle and won and granted victory for his fellow-combatant. ¹⁴ Aren’t stupid those (people) who are very slow in understanding easy (things)? What

¹³³ Tosefta, *Hagigah* 2.2: “R. Yose b. Jugah says, ‘R. Joshua laid matters (i.e., concerning the Chariot) out before Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai. R. ‘Aqiba laid matters out before R. Joshua. Hananiah b. Kinai laid matters out before R. ‘Aqiba’” (ed. Lieberman, *The Tosefta*, 380.13–381.1; trans. Neusner, *The Tosefta*, 312).

¹³⁴ Goshen Gottstein, “Paradise,” 83: “(T)he key to R. Akiba’s successful entry into the *pardes* is the very fact that in the second unit he was established as a legitimate link in a chain of relations between teachers and students. It is this fact that ensures his safe exit from the *pardes*.” *Pardes* (פרדס) is the Hebrew designation of the orchard or garden which was the goal of rabbis’ ascent in tHag 2:3, see fn. 127 above. About the orchard in Rabbinic literature, see Goshen Gottstein, “Paradise,” 93–100.

¹³⁵ See fn. 127 above.

¹³⁶ See Tosefta, *Hagigah* 2.3: “Ben Zoma gazed and was smitten. Concerning him Scripture says, *If you have found honey, eat only enough, (lest you be sated with it and vomit it).*” For the Hebrew text, see fn. 127 above.

¹³⁷ For the Mishnah, see fn. 129 above.

light is (as) beautiful during its dawning as the *name of Paul*?¹³⁵ What way is so easy to go as (the way of) his writings? And who is wearied on the path of *his sweet words*?¹³⁸

The somewhat obscure line 14a seems, secondly, to suggest that the “deniers” objected to the lack of clarity of the apostle’s Paul writings. In response, Narsai claims that Paul’s letters are beautiful and easy reading (ln. 14b–15a). In the slightly different, but nevertheless connected direction point also ln. 3–4. The “deniers” are complaining:

Too much thinking over (God’s) glorious things is not good ... Inquiry (into texts) produces working on words (which) makes the soul roam, and the mind becomes drunk with refutations in the same way as with wine.

God’s “glorious things” make one think about Paul’s mystical experiences mentioned in Acts 9:1–2 and 2 Cor 12:1–5 and extensively treated by Narsai previously in this *mēmṛā*.¹³⁹ Thus, the “deniers” were probably cautious about Paul’s letters partly because they found them protruding too deeply into God’s mysteries and being too difficult to understand in general. Narsai does not say anything about their views concerning the practical side of mysticism. Still, the reservation concerning complex places of the Holy Scripture and especially mystical passages supported by the reference to Prv 25:16, 27 strongly reminds one of Tosefta *Ḥagiga* 2:3–4 in its rabbinic context. Nevertheless, the mystical component is not completely lacking because of Narsai’s polemic against God’s limitedness which presupposes that the “deniers” considered God being a body of some sort.¹⁴⁰ Coupled with their anti-Paulinism, this feature provides an exact parallel to the Jewish-Christian *Pseudo-Clementine* Homily 17 which is anti-Pauline and insisting on God having a human body in the same time.¹⁴¹ An additional piece of evidence of the interests of the “deniers” in mysticism might be Narsai’s refutation of the wrong understanding of Acts 9:1–2 and 2 Cor 12:1–5.¹⁴²

The last passage from Narsai’s refutation of the “deniers” to be discussed is c.¹⁴³ Here Narsai addresses Prv 25:16, 27 as a scriptural argument for avoiding the excessive study of the Bible. In ln. 7, the person the group learned this exegesis from is called “master” which likewise can be translated as “teacher.”¹⁴⁴ Narsai designates the same person also as “teacher of writing” (*sāpṛā*)¹⁴⁵ and says that he

¹³⁸ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.86.11–21; 1.87.3, 4, 12–13, 16–20).

¹³⁹ See fn. 26–27 above.

¹⁴⁰ See fn. 8 and 18 above.

¹⁴¹ See fn. 22 above.

¹⁴² See fn. 26–27 and pp. 48–49 above.

¹⁴³ See pp. 60–61 above.

¹⁴⁴ Syriac *rabbā*, see Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’ (ed. Mingana 1.86.19) and Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, s. v.

¹⁴⁵ See ln. 8 and fn. 112 above.

taught the “deniers” reading.¹⁴⁶ His interpretation¹⁴⁷ of Prv 25:16, 27 discourages the pupils from studying the Holy Scripture and, more broadly, from religious learning.¹⁴⁸

The fact that the enigmatic teacher was acquainted with an explanation of Prv 25:16, 27 which is – as far as I know – virtually absent from the early Christian tradition precludes the conclusion that we have to do with just some simple-minded individual. His position as teacher, his designation as *rabbā*, and Narsai’s serious preoccupation with the case also does not presuppose any real disinterest in knowledge on his part. A few parallels discussed above point, rather, in the direction of an exponent of Jewish-Christian traditions competitive with the understanding of the apostle Paul and his writings which Narsai feels himself compelled to defend. The evidence suggests that some Jewish-Christian ideas around Narsai were transmitted in the form of more or less regular teaching activities which should have bothered Narsai not only as preacher of the Church of the East but, probably even more, as director of the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis.¹⁴⁹

Conclusions

I would like to summarize these observations in four theses. First, the “deniers” of biblical studies Narsai is confronted with were probably of Jewish-Christian origin. In this respect Paul Krüger’s suggestion proved to be right. Second, their skepticism concerning the apostle Paul seems to have at least two sources: one of them going back to the anti-Paulinism similar to that of the *Pseudo-Clementines* and another being connected with Jewish rabbinic awareness of dangers coming from complicated and mystical parts of the Holy Scripture. Third, another link to the *Pseudo-Clementine* writings is provided through the notion of the human body of the Divine that the “deniers” possibly held. The general context of Narsai’s polemic against them leads us to assume that some of the “deniers” could be engaged in mystical practice where the body of the incarnate Christ and the human body of the Father were contemplated by means of the physical eyes.

¹⁴⁶ Ln. 7b, Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.19–20): “who painted the letters and taught them to read from Tau till Alph.”

¹⁴⁷ Syriac *turgāmā*, see Narsai, *Mēmṛā 8 ‘On Peter and Paul’* (ed. Mingana 1.86.20).

¹⁴⁸ See ln. 8–10.

¹⁴⁹ The case analyzed is only one among a number of instances where Narsai seems to take into account the presence of Jewish Christians among his hearers and readers, see also S. Fomicheva, “Educational Background of Mar Narsai: Between the ‘Tradition of the School’ and Theodore of Mopsuestia’s Exegesis,” in P. Bruns and Th. Kremer (eds.), *Studia Syriaca. Beiträge des IX. Deutschen Syrologentages in Eichstätt 2016* (EBCO 6; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 61–69 and D. F. Bumazhnov and S. Fomicheva, “Narsai’s Memra *Gegen die Juden*: die ‘jüdischen’ Begriffe im anti-jüdischen Kontext” (in preparation).

Fourth, Narsai defends the study of the Bible and in particular of the apostle Paul vigorously which make sense both in the context of his activities as preacher of the Church of the East and as director of the Schools of Edessa and of Nisibis.

In Search of Jesus

Performative Christology in Narsai's *Mēmṛē* on Baptism

Jeff W. Childers

Narsai's *Mēmṛē* on Baptism

Because of their rich and often distinctive testimony, verse homilies on the sacraments composed by Narsai (d. ca. 500) have received a fair amount of scholarly attention. For one thing, his are the first *mēmṛē* we have from a Syriac author that basically resemble mystagogical catecheses.¹ They are also among the first to have been made readily available in English.² Furthermore, his interpretations are foundational for the Christian tradition that comes to be known as the Church of the East. The relative isolation of that tradition from western developments has encouraged scholars to look for vestiges of distinctive or even primitive elements in his liturgical testimony and has provided helpful starting points for ecumenical discussion.³ Also, Narsai was a major proponent of the thought of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428).⁴ Receiving Theodore as the interpreter *par excellence*, Narsai represents a key source for understanding him and his impact, particularly in the Church of the East.

To a large extent, discussion of these *mēmṛē* has focused on matters of order and source critical questions – such as their dependence on Theodore; to a lesser

¹ Contextualizing the original and subsequent uses of Narsai's *mēmṛē* is a pressing *desideratum*. Varghese maintains that the liturgical *mēmṛē* of Narsai “were most probably composed for the instruction of the faithful,” though their syllabic meter suggests liturgical use as well (B. Varghese, *West Syrian Liturgical Theology* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004], 20). Thumpeparampil notes that they do not merely enumerate “rites and actions” but they “explain the theological content and symbolism behind the rites” (T. Thumpeparampil, “Mar Narsai and his Liturgical Homilies on Christian Initiation,” *CO* 13 [1992]: 130–131). Witkamp's characterization of the *mēmṛē* on baptism as a “panegyric” on the baptismal rite is helpful (N. Witkamp, “A Critical Comparison of the So-called ‘Lawsuit’ in the Baptismal Rites of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai of Nisibis,” *VC* 65 [2011]: 523).

² R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 8:1; Cambridge: University Press, 1909), 33–61.

³ See P. Brouwers, “Premier poème de Narsai sur le baptême (*Mēmṛā* 21),” *MUSJ* 41 (1965): 179–180; T. W. Manson, “Entry into Membership of the Early Church,” *JTS* 48 (1947): 25–26.

⁴ See F. G. McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension: Critical Edition of Syriac Text* (PO 40.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 7.

extent on Narsai's imagery and themes.⁵ The two *mēm̄rē* on baptism are not exceptional in this regard.⁶ In them scholars have attended mainly to such matters as the prebaptismal anointing and the absence of a postbaptismal one. Concerns about anointings and signings often reflect a preoccupation with determining when and how the baptizand is thought to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (and therefore whether some aspect of the east Syrian rite might be seen to correspond to confirmation in the western tradition).⁷ Indeed, Mingana's peculiar ordering of the two *mēm̄rē* in his 1905 edition may owe something to such pre-occupations.⁸ In his edition, *Mēm̄rā* 22 deals mainly with the anointing and the first part of the rite, whereas *Mēm̄rā* 21 deals mainly with the subsequent water baptism and eucharist.⁹ In Mingana's List of Narsai's extant homilies (and in W. Macomber's list), these are *Mēm̄rē* 39 and 38, respectively, and it is by these numbers they are now known.¹⁰ We are right to follow Connolly in treating these two as "complementary" homilies, but reversing their published order so as to reflect the actual sequence of the rite – *Mēm̄rā* 39 properly comes before 38.¹¹ Connolly speculates that Mingana himself may have put them in the wrong order due to a misunderstanding of the anointing in *Mēm̄rā* 39 as post-baptismal, reflecting later East Syrian practice.¹²

⁵ See the discussion in S. M. Jones, *Womb of the Spirit: The Liturgical Implications of the Doctrine of the Spirit for the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Cambridge, 1999), 1–11.

⁶ For an overview of the *mēm̄rē*'s structures and contents, see J. Chalassery, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation in the East Syrian Tradition* (Rome: St. Thomas Christian Fellowship, 1995), 69–88.

⁷ S. P. Brock shows that in early Syrian Christianity, "[t]he gift of the Spirit is essentially conferred by the rite as a whole, and within the rite the anointing and the baptism in water form an inseparable unity" (*Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* [2d ed.; SCS 9; Poona/Kottayam: Anita, 1998], 64).

⁸ A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905), 1.341–368. English translation in Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33–61; French translations in P. Gignoux, *apud* A. Hamman, *L'initiation chrétienne* (CLC 7; Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1963), 195–247 (*Mēm̄rā* 38); and A. Guillaumont, "Poème de Narsai sur le baptême," *OS* 1 (1956): 189–207 (*Mēm̄rā* 39); Brouwers, "Premier poème de Narsai sur le baptême (*Memra* 21)," 186–207 (*Mēm̄rā* 38).

⁹ The Syriac texts of *Mēm̄rē* 39 and 38 are published in Mingana, *Narsai Homiliae et Carmina*, 1.356–368, 341–356. The Syriac texts also appear in the facsimile edition prepared by Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, *Homilies of Mar Narsai* (San Francisco: Patriarchal Press, 1970), 2.617–34; 1.457–79. See S. P. Brock, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies," *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40. For a list of known manuscripts, see W. F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 39 (1973): 275–306.

¹⁰ Mingana, *Narsai Homiliae et Carmina*, 1.29; Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 275–306.

¹¹ Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, xv, xlvi–xlvi; also Brouwers, "Premier poème de Narsai sur le baptême," 180; Thumpeparampil, "Mar Narsai and his Liturgical Homilies on Christian Initiation," 126–127, 131–32.

¹² However, it should be noticed that early manuscripts having both *mēm̄rē* also sometimes put them in the "reverse" order: ms. Chaldean Patriarchate, Baghdad 71 (CE 1188–1288),

With respect to the history of the development of the eastern rite, several have characterized Narsai as Theodore's imitator.¹³ Leonel Mitchell goes so far as to say, "[h]is ... homilies on baptism ... follow so closely the account of Theodore of Mopsuestia that they might almost be described as poetic renditions of Theodore's text."¹⁴ Whereas such an assessment may betray a narrow angle of analysis dominated by a desire to track directions of influence and a rather Theodore-centric agenda, it cannot be denied that Narsai's thought and language regularly and deeply reflect Theodore's influence. Indeed, while Theodore's description of the rite includes a post-baptismal anointing or signing, Narsai is seen to be such a faithful witness to Theodore that the absence of a post-baptismal unction in Narsai is put forward as a major piece of evidence for seeing its mention in Theodore as a secondary interpolation into Theodore's text.¹⁵ Nevertheless, casting Narsai as merely an imitator can lead to presumptions about his value as a source that are unnecessarily dismissive.¹⁶ Furthermore, Nathan Witkamp's comparative study of the "lawsuit" portion of their prebaptismal rites has revealed important distinctions between Narsai and Theodore, elucidating key differences between the two concerning the lawsuit's position, details, and meaning. Witkamp proves that important features of Narsai's material cannot be explained simply on the basis of reliance on Theodore.¹⁷ Brock has shown that

fol. 393–415; ms. Diarbekir 71 (14th century), 19:2a–20:5a. Regarding the development of the baptismal rite, see S. P. Brock, "The Transition to a Post-Baptismal Anointing in the Antiochene Rite," in B. D. Spinks (ed.), *The Sacrifice of Praise: Studies on the Themes of Thanksgiving and Redemption in the Central Prayers of the Eucharistic and Baptismal Liturgies. In Honour of A. H. Couratin* (Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae," Subsidia 19; Rome: CLV Edizione Liturgica, 1981), 215–225; Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, xlix; M. E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (rev. ed.; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 144. Spinks suggests that the diversity of evidence indicates diversity of practice and complicates developmental interpretations of the anointing (*Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism from the New Testament to the Council of Trent* [Farnham: Ashgate, 2006], 46–47, 83).

¹³ See F. G. McLeod, "Narsai's Dependence on Theodore of Mopsuestia," *JCSSS* 7 (2007): 18–38.

¹⁴ L. Mitchell, "Four Fathers on Baptism," in J. Vellian (ed.), *Studies on Syrian Baptismal Rites* (SCS 6; Kottayam: C. M. S. Press, 1973), 52–53; K. McDonnell similarly sees Narsai as essentially a conduit for Theodore's thought (*The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996], 215).

¹⁵ See the discussion in B. Varghese, *Les onctions baptismales dans la tradition syrienne* (CSCO 512; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 97–99; also C. J. A. Lash, "L'onction post-baptismale de la 14e homélie de Theodore de Mopsueste: Une interpolation syriaque?" in Y. Hervouet (ed.), *XXIX Congrès international des orientalistes: Résumés des communications* (Paris, 1973), 43–44. E. Ferguson cautions against presumptions of a universal absence of a postbaptismal unction in early Syrian practice (*Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 526 fn. 23).

¹⁶ E. g., Spinks repeatedly expresses skepticism about Narsai's value as an independent witness in his "The Rise and Decline of Sin and the Devil in the East Syrian Baptismal Tradition," *SP* 26 (1993): 70, 72, 74.

¹⁷ Witkamp, "A Critical Comparison of the So-called 'Lawsuit,'" 540–542.

Narsai draws on other sources besides Theodore, perhaps even a catechetical tradition slightly earlier than Theodore, one that has influenced Theodore as well.¹⁸ Without denying Narsai's dependence on Theodore, it is apparent that reading Narsai on his own terms yields insights that may be obscured when reading Narsai only in Theodore's shadow. The discussion of certain themes in what follows corroborates this observation.

Adapted to a Zoroastrian Context?

Though details of the baptism ritual and matters of comparative liturgy have captured the larger share of scholarly attention, Narsai's imagery and the theology informing it have also generated some interest. For example, Everett Ferguson treats Narsai's *mēmṛē* on baptism in his monumental survey of early Christian baptism, noticing that "[s]ome readers would see a weakness in Narsai's attention to the Spirit and priests at the expense of reference to Christ."¹⁹ In other words, some judge Narsai's Christology in these *mēmṛē* to be weak. Ferguson points to the study of Sr. Marcianne Kappes, who also uses the expression "major weakness" with respect to the subject of Narsai's Christology in these *mēmṛē*, though she does so in order to support a reading of Narsai that credits him with contextualizing his exposition of baptism in a Zoroastrian milieu.²⁰

Kappes observes that, "[w]hen writing on Baptism, he refrains totally from using the phrase Jesus Christ, the name of Jesus is never used, and the term 'Christ' is employed only once."²¹ She undoubtedly means the reference, "Come, disciples of the Master, the Messiah (*rabbā mšīḥā*)" in *Mēmṛā* 39.²² Kappes' statement needs to be qualified somewhat, since towards the end of *Mēmṛā* 38, where Narsai is expounding on the Eucharist, he quotes the priest to say "the body of the King, the Messiah (*malkā mšīḥā*)" and "the blood of the Messiah (*dmā damšīḥā*),"²³ so we have two more occurrences of "Christ." Although these lie outside Narsai's discussion of baptism they are part of the message of the same *mēmṛē* and should not be ignored. Nevertheless, the scarcity of explicit references to Jesus Christ is striking, given the length of these *mēmṛē* and their subject matter (Christian initiation and baptism) – all the more so in comparison to Theodore's three *Catechetical Homilies* on baptism, that Narsai often

¹⁸ S. P. Brock, "Some Early Syriac Baptismal Commentaries," *OCP* 46 (1980): 22, 56–57, 61.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 708.

²⁰ M. A. Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters: The Baptismal Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis," *SP* 33 (1997): 542.

²¹ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 542–543.

²² *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.358, 11; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 35).

²³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.354.22–23; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 60).

follows, where references to Christ occur more frequently.²⁴ Some of Theodore's references set up Gospel quotations and may be incidental, but many are tied to more fundamental application of insights about Christ that shape and inform Theodore's teaching – i.e., they are properly christological.

Ferguson's work has deservedly become a standard reference on the early history of Christian baptism, and his analysis of Narsai relies heavily on Kappes. In Maxwell E. Johnson's expansion of E. C. Whitaker's more venerable standard work on baptism, Kappes' article is one of only two studies cited for Narsai.²⁵ Is it the case, as Kappes maintains and we find being repeated in commonly used resources on early Christian baptism, that Narsai's teaching about baptism minimizes Christology for the sake of elevating the priesthood and emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit, in order to contextualize baptism "in a socio-religious culture which emphasizes Spirit and priesthood"?²⁶ Kappes lists several themes to illustrate her point, some of which Benjamin Leese rehearses and expands upon in his 2005 study,²⁷ while other themes actually find earlier mention in Scott Sunquist's doctoral dissertation, a work of which the others seem not to be aware.²⁸ In order to evaluate the proposal, the remainder of this article examines Narsai's teaching on baptism, especially in *Mēmre* 39–38, in an attempt to establish a more clear understanding of Narsai's baptismal Christology in these texts.

Neglecting Genre: Biblical Citations and Trinitarian References

First, some of the evidence adduced for the Zoroastrian contextualization proposal does not take sufficient account of Narsai's poetic style and the constraints of genre. For instance, Kappes observes that "virtually no passages from Sacred Scripture are quoted explicitly in these homilies,"²⁹ enabling Narsai to be less overt in his employment of biblical authority as he subtly synthesizes Christian themes with Zoroastrian constructs by means of allusion and implication. In response, we should observe that Narsai's poetic style requires pairs of balanced lines in a highly regular dodecasyllabic meter; lengthy or precise citations

²⁴ A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* (WS 6; Cambridge: Heffer & Sons, 1933).

²⁵ E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Tradition* (3rd ed. revised and expanded by M. E. Johnson; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003), 54.

²⁶ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 543.

²⁷ B. E. Leese, "Zoroastrian Influence on Syriac Baptismal Rites," *AJT* 19 (2005): 350–367.

²⁸ S. W. Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians: A Study in Cultural Contact and Conflict* (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1990). Kappes mentions three other dissertations from the 1980s (Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 546 fn. 68).

²⁹ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 544.

of scripture do not fit and are naturally uncommon.³⁰ The same may be observed in Jacob of Serugh's verse homilies and in Ephrem's complex verse. These other authors also illustrate the tendency, shared by Narsai and the early Syrian tradition generally, for using rich imagery and crafting metaphors, yet not as a way of camouflaging or softening the edges of the Christian tradition. In short, the dearth of verbatim citations in Narsai is better seen as a matter of style and not evidence of Zoroastrian contextualization.

A second such observation relates to the term "Trinity." Kappes says that Narsai uses the term only once, preferring to talk about the "three names" instead, thereby appealing to the Zoroastrian fondness for triplication without using an awkward theological technical term.³¹ As it happens, though Connolly does indeed use the term "Trinity" once in his English translation,³² the Syriac actually has *tlitā'it* "triplewise."³³ The term *tlitāyutā* "Trinity" occurs nowhere in either *mēmṛā*, and therefore even the single occurrence that Kappes noticed is removed. Yet this does not strengthen Kappes' case. We may refer again to the work of Narsai's Greek-speaking master Theodore, whose homilies on baptism, despite being fuller and more detailed than Narsai's, omit the term "Trinity" as well. Yet explicit references to the Father, Son, and Spirit together occur more than fifty times, frequently mentioning "name" also. So Narsai's omission of the term "Trinity" is not remarkable, and a theory of Zoroastrian contextualization is not needed to explain it. It is true that Narsai is fond of the expression "the three names," one that he uses regularly (at least nine times), but he is not averse to more overt trinitarian language. Like Theodore, Narsai refers explicitly to the Father, Son, and Spirit together several times (at least seven), often mentioning "name."³⁴ Apart from the importance of the term "name" (*šmā*) in Narsai's thought, his fondness for the phrase "three names" (*šmāhē tlātā*) surely owes more to the economics of metrical style than to a deliberate avoidance of the longer formulae (which he also uses). The same may be said of his frequent use of the expression "in the name of the Divinity" (*bšem 'itūtā*; at least eight times). In one place, Narsai has, "in the name of the Divinity, the three Names."³⁵ In another place, Narsai has "with the name of the Divinity, three hypostases" (*bšem 'itūtā qnōmē tlātā*). On a number of occasions Narsai uses the similarly economical "three times" (*tlāt zaḥnātā*) for trinitari-

³⁰ For more detailed discussion of the ways poetic meter shape Narsai's word choices, see Forness's contribution in this volume (pp. 93–115).

³¹ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 544.

³² Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41.

³³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365.5, 9).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.346.3, 9, 12; 352.2; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 51, 57).

³⁵ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.345.14; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 50). The Mosul manuscript has "three hypostases" (*qnōmē*); see Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 50 fn. 1.

an aspects of the ritual.³⁶ As with the question of verbatim citations, the use of “the three names” is better explained as a stylistic feature and an expression of Narsai’s interest in the title “name” rather than an instance of contextualization, especially in view of Narsai’s many explicit references to the persons of the Trinity throughout the *mēmṛē*.³⁷

Native Themes: Cosmic Warfare and the Spirit

More substantial than the formal features discussed above is the use of combat imagery. Cosmic warfare is a key theme in Zoroastrian soteriology, and it is also a prominent feature of Narsai’s baptismal exposition.³⁸ Narsai sees the oil of the *rušmā* (“sign, mark”) as protection against spiritual enemies, emphasizing the connection between oil and armor; it bears a sharp edge, incising the candidate with the king’s name as a newly-enrolled soldier.³⁹ In the ceremony they are “like diligent soldiers,” with the priest as a general, fitting their mouths with “arrows of words” so they may attack the Evil One by their confessions.⁴⁰ They are pictured as athletes who “engage in the struggle” in the arena, marked by the Spirit to “fight battles against the Evil One.”⁴¹ The imagery is striking, but we need not look to an immediate Zoroastrian context to explain it. If the combat motifs of Jewish and Christian warfare imagery owe something to Persian mythology, the connections must be sought well before the time of Narsai and his immediate missiological context, for this imagery had become commonplace long before Narsai’s time. Kappes emphasizes the candidate’s explicit rejection of evil, yet as with the combat imagery generally, the ritual renunciation of Satan and his angels⁴² is not sufficiently distinctive in Narsai to warrant seeing it a response to Zoroastrian themes. Rather, in the renunciation we see the local employment of concepts and practices that had become fairly widespread in Christianity no later than the third century⁴³ and that feature prominently in Theodore.⁴⁴ We may certainly speak of the common

³⁶ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.353.16 trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 59).

³⁷ Narsai’s focus on the divine name is one of the most innovative aspects of his explication of the baptismal ritual. See Becker in this volume (pp. 25–40).

³⁸ See Kappes, “The Voice of Many Waters,” 545–546.

³⁹ Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 43, 44; see Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Baptismal Tradition*, 147–49, 154–56.

⁴⁰ Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 43.

⁴¹ Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 45. The sign imprints a person with the mark of ownership, expressed in terms of the person’s ability to fend off Satan’s attacks (Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Baptismal Tradition*, 53, 149, 156; Brouwers, “Premier poème de Narsai sur le baptême,” 182–183).

⁴² Connolly, *Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 36–37.

⁴³ See Spinks, “Rise and Decline of Sin and the Devil,” 67.

⁴⁴ See the discussion in Witkamp, “A Critical Comparison of the So-called ‘Lawsuit,’” 520–525.

ground shared by Christianity and Zoroastrianism in their militaristic imagery of struggle and conquest, as evidenced by Narsai,⁴⁵ but we find no evidence indicating Narsai's use of the traditional imagery is distinctively conditioned by the socio-religious context.

Narsai mentions the (Holy) Spirit many times, leading Kappes to compare this emphasis with the prominent role given to the Holy Spirit in Zoroastrian texts.⁴⁶ In these *mēmṛē*, the Spirit is equal to the Father and the Son, the source of boundless wealth, the one by whom the priest expounds the word and through whom baptismal candidates are able to perceive the truth of the mysteries. The Spirit strengthens feeble flesh, heats the waters, cleanses the candidate, and imparts a healing drug, effecting the divine Artist's remaking of the candidate.⁴⁷ Narsai credits the Spirit with these and other operations, yet there is nothing distinctly Zoroastrian about this portrait. To the contrary, it all seems very natural, for Narsai stands as heir to the deep, multifaceted pneumatology we find throughout the early Syrian baptismal tradition.⁴⁸ For Narsai, as for others, the Spirit is the main agent in the Trinity animating the sacraments of Christian liturgy, so it is not surprising to see considerable emphasis given to the Spirit in these *mēmṛē*.⁴⁹ Apart from the growing emphasis on the Spirit we encounter in Syrian liturgy from the fourth century in response to pneumatological controversies,⁵⁰ early Syrian sources boast many rich and creative expositions of the Spirit's place in baptism, so that Narsai's emphasis is not remarkable in this regard. Indeed, in the two instances in these *mēmṛē* where Narsai connects the primordial waters to baptism, he makes no mention of the Spirit,⁵¹ as Aphrahat and Ephrem both do. In this he may be following Theodore,⁵² but he is also doing the opposite of what one would expect if his agenda was to contextualize Christian baptism in the Zoroastrian context as Kappes claims.

⁴⁵ Sunquist, "Narsai and the Persians," 67–68, 237–243.

⁴⁶ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 544.

⁴⁷ See Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 160–161.

⁴⁸ See especially Brock's study, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*.

⁴⁹ See Chalassery, *Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation*, 82–88.

⁵⁰ See J. Quasten, "The Blessing of the Baptismal Font in the Syrian Rite of the Fourth Century," *TS* 7 (1946): 309–313; H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation: A Comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal Liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan* (CUA SCA 17; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 397–398 fn. 143.

⁵¹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.341, 344–345; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 46, 49–50).

⁵² Brock suggests this, since Theodore interprets the "spirit" in Genesis 1 as merely "wind" (*Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 127–128).

Creation and Recreation

Perhaps more distinctive is the theme of creation and recreation. Kappes observes that Zoroastrianism emphasizes the role of humanity in cooperating with lesser divinities in combatting evil, purifying the world, and restoring the good creation.⁵³ Commenting on the role of the priest in baptism, in the first part of *Mēmra* 39 Narsai declares:

O creator, who came and renewed his creation, handing a pen to the work of his own hands, that it may depict itself!

Who would not be amazed at the greatness of his love and kindness, that he has made our clay the creator of a creation, resembling him?

...

Along with renewal, he gave to our nature authority to create itself as a new creation of immortals.

...

He showed his creative art to our soul, and it acquired the power to create a creation, like the creator.⁵⁴

We find other contexts illustrating Narsai's use of the new creation theme, but this one illustrates best the particular idea in question. After all, themes of rebirth and the related themes of creation and re-creation are common in early Christian baptismal texts,⁵⁵ and in early Syriac baptismal texts they are more prominent than themes of death and resurrection.⁵⁶ The creative activities of painting and drawing supply Narsai with some of his favorite theological metaphors.⁵⁷ However, it is the idea of "the human person" as "a fellow worker with God"⁵⁸ that is of interest here. Is Narsai here picturing a soteriology in which humans are called to collaborate with God in his work of restoring creation, a vision of Christianity that would be especially appealing to people influenced by Zoroastrian ideals? At least two concerns in particular suggest that the answer is negative.

First, the real focus here is not soteriology *per se* and the Christian's task of assisting God in effecting the cosmic plan of redemption. The focus is specifically on the priest as mediator in the act of baptism.⁵⁹ Throughout the passage, it is

⁵³ Kappes, "The Voice of Many Waters," 545–546.

⁵⁴ *Mēmra* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.357.18–21, 22–23, 25; 358.1; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 34).

⁵⁵ See numerous references in Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*.

⁵⁶ Brock, *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 124; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 47, 72–73; also K. McDonnell, "Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan," *TS* 56 (1995): 228–231. Ironically, Narsai moves away from the new creation theme, in the sense that he also relies heavily on the theme of water as grave, and is among the first Syriac writers to do so (see below).

⁵⁷ See Rodrigo Gómez in this volume (pp. 187–197).

⁵⁸ Kappes ("The Voice of Many Waters," 546): "For a Zoroastrian, the religious duty of the human person is to be a fellow worker with God."

⁵⁹ Sunquist notes that the priest specifically represents God as creator in the ritual (*Narsai and the Persians*, 203).

the priest who is always in view as the instrument by which God effects the new creation. God is the actor, of course, but the priest is instrument, and the priest's status as a mere human elicits Narsai's wonder at the display of creative energy. Furthermore, baptism is the venue of this creative operation; the arena is not the Christian life more broadly conceived or the world at large, nor is there any hint that the creative activity under consideration here happens outside or beyond the baptism event. There is nothing here to suggest that Narsai presumes the sort of backdrop of ongoing collaborative creative activity on the part of the laity, alongside the clergy, that one might ascribe to Zoroastrian soteriology.⁶⁰ It is simply baptism as new creation for the candidate mediated by the priest.

A second concern has to do with the tendency of early Syriac poets to emphasize irony and highlight paradox. Narsai does this often, as does his younger contemporary Jacob of Serugh, in imitation of their theological and stylistic forebear, Ephrem. In this passage, the power and craft of the creator are repeatedly juxtaposed with the instrumental role of the creature – the human priest – in order to create a sense of paradox and heighten the listener's appreciation of the marvel that is occurring, largely invisibly, before their eyes. This amplifies the creative miracle on the one hand and the priest's role on the other, but the aim is to engender wonder at the contrast rather than to advance specific claims about human collaboration in God's scheme of salvation. Therefore, without minimizing the significance of new creation for Syrian baptism or the extent to which ancient Zoroastrianism and early Christianity share convictions about the renewal of creation,⁶¹ I do not find evidence that Narsai's deployment of that theme is conditioned principally by his desire to contextualize Christian practice in Zoroastrian society.

The Priesthood in Narsai's Mēmrē on Baptism

Narsai's emphasis on the priest's role leads to a further consideration of the place of the priesthood in these two *mēmrē*. The elevation of the role of the priest in these *mēmrē* is striking.⁶² Zoroastrian society emphasized the office of priest – is Narsai answering that by drawing attention to the dignity of the Christian priest?⁶³ Many of Narsai's references to the priest are rather incidental, merely describing the priest's actions in the ceremony. Theodore's homilies do the same. However, in several places, Narsai seems intent on emphasizing the qualities

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the breadth of the redemptive work that Zoroastrianism pictures, see Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 85–90.

⁶¹ See Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 255–260.

⁶² See Chalassery, *Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation*, 84–85.

⁶³ Kappes claims that Narsai's "baptismal theology is a theology of the Spirit in which the power of the priesthood emerges as a theme that dominates a major portion of his homilies on baptism" ("The Voice of Many Waters," 542).

of the priest's role. For instance, just prior to the passage on new creation cited previously, Narsai exclaims, "O priesthood, how it has been exalted above all, / having attained a place in the height and the depth by the power of him who has chosen it!" Later in the *mēmṛā* he intones, "Through the priesthood the creator has been pleased to reveal his power, / and he has committed to it the great riches of his kindness. / He has established the priests as stewards over his fortune,... He has given them the signet of the name of his incomprehensible divinity."⁶⁴ A few lines later, he explains, "The priest gives life to his companions through his ministry, / making a path for his colleagues to the things that are to come."⁶⁵ Narsai casts the priest as mediator, steward of the mysteries, treasure-keeper, an advocate against the devil, physician,⁶⁶ the general of an army, the one who pays the debt of humankind, branding the flock with the hidden holy name. As we have seen, the priest is a collaborator with God in his work of new creation.⁶⁷ He casts his word like seed on the waters, engendering a new birth.⁶⁸ His role is loftier than that of angels: "O priest, how great is the order that you administer, / of which the ministers of fire and spirit tremble in awe!"⁶⁹ What happens through the priest administering baptism outstrips even the angelic liturgy.

Theodore's homilies are not the source of this emphasis.⁷⁰ Theodore mentions the priest a number of times, but nearly always in fairly colorless descriptions of his actions in the ceremony.⁷¹ In just a few places Theodore honors the priest as intermediary, steward of the church, and witness of the candidate's confession,⁷² albeit in far less vivid terms than Narsai does. By contrast, Narsai draws attention to the priest in several contexts. He evidently wants his listeners to appreciate the dignity and standing of the clergy, yet this cannot be his only aim nor even the main thrust of his clerical emphasis. Even as he draws attention to the priest, he constantly points beyond the priest. Lofty and astonishing as it is, the work is not the priest's own. Narsai clarifies repeatedly that it is God's power at work; the priest is the passive agent, the mediator of God's activity: "The priest does not say 'I sign,'" he insists, "but 'is signed'; / because the seal that he imprints is not his

⁶⁴ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365, 1–4; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41).

⁶⁵ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365, 14–15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 42).

⁶⁶ See Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 159.

⁶⁷ Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 202–203.

⁶⁸ Muehlberger considers Narsai's creative handling of traditional baptismal motifs of birth and rebirth in her study (pp. 175–185 in this volume).

⁶⁹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342, 21–22; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 47).

⁷⁰ Cf. Mitchell, "Four Fathers on Baptism," 53, who sees Narsai's emphasis on the priest as another example of the latter following Theodore.

⁷¹ *Catechetical Homilies*, 34–35, 45–46, 55–56, 59–63 (ed. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*).

⁷² *Catechetical Homilies*, 34, 54 (ed. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*).

own but that of his Lord's."⁷³ Near the beginning of *Mēmṛā* 38 Narsai says, "The priest is like a pen to the hidden Power,"⁷⁴ the tool of God whose role and status are crucial, highly dignified, yet completely derivative. Also, we must remember Narsai's tendency to amplify each side of a tension for the sake of conveying a sense of paradox, mentioned previously. He regularly balances his praise for the priest by stressing the priest's low estate as a human: dust-born, mortal, clay, servant, weak, lowly, feeble, slender-minded – these are some of the descriptions that regularly accompany his adulation of the priest. Once again, the dynamic of this rhetoric engenders wonder, compelling the listener to focus not so much on the priest's humble humanity nor on his exalted role in baptism but on the space in-between – on the marvel taking place as a result of the priest's mediating God's power. The power of God is the real focus, and Narsai's emphasis on the priest serves to accent that more than to exalt the priesthood as such. Although Narsai can be critical of the priesthood,⁷⁵ he routinely lauds the priesthood in his writings,⁷⁶ but his teaching here probably owes more to the circumstances of the clergy within his church rather than a concern to accommodate his message respecting Zoroastrian estimates of the priesthood. Strong emphasis on the clergy in Christian teaching is often taken to be part of an author's campaign to elevate or reinforce clerical status where it is under-appreciated, rather than as an accommodation to the culture's high estimate of the priesthood. In any case, Narsai's references to the priest consistently point beyond the priest to God, underscoring the priest as mediator. His emphasis on the priest invites further exploration and may indeed shed light on the situation of these *mēmṛē*, but there is no evidence to suggest Narsai's exposition of the clergy's role in baptism is responding to Zoroastrianism.

Fire and Water

Leese remarks on some of the same themes as Kappes, though perhaps with less restraint. His aim is to show actual Zoroastrian influence on East Syrian baptismal practices. For instance, whereas Kappes merely alludes to the importance of water in the rituals of both religions, Leese finds the source of the three-fold

⁷³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.367.17–18; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 44); see also *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.346.5–6; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 51, with reference to baptism). Kappes notices Narsai's emphasis on the priest's passivity but prefers to emphasize the priest's role as agent ("The Voice of Many Waters," 539, 541).

⁷⁴ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342.15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 47).

⁷⁵ See especially *Memṛā* 59 'On the Church and the Priesthood' (ed. Mingana 1.153–154; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 71–72), where Narsai criticizes ignorant and self-serving clergy. I am grateful to Eva María Rodrigo Gómez for this observation.

⁷⁶ "It is characteristic of Narsai to speak of the high status of the priesthood and its functions in glowing terms whenever the subject is referred" (Thumpeparampil, "Mar Narsai and his Liturgical Homilies on Christian Initiation," 128).

immersion in Syrian baptism in the Zoroastrian practices of triple washings with bull's urine, sand or dust, and water.⁷⁷ But Leese emphasizes one item in particular that is prominent in Zoroastrian ritual but does not figure in Kappes' study: fire. The imagery of mystical fire and heat occurs repeatedly in Narsai's *mēm̄rē*. Narsai introduces the subject in the beginning of *Mēm̄rā* 39: "As in a furnace he recast our image in baptism, / and in place of our clay he has made us into spiritual gold."⁷⁸ Like cleansing fire, baptism purges a person of impurities; on the positive side, baptism is a crucible, where spiritual heat enables the recasting and remaking of a person. Later Narsai uses the image to set the stage for those about to be baptized:

His divine nod erected mystically a furnace of water,
and instead of fire he has heated it with the Spirit of the power of his will.
He made the artifact an artisan over his handiwork,
that it should recast itself in the furnace of the water and the Spirit's fervent heat.⁷⁹

Narsai uses this sort of imagery several times in these *mēm̄rē*.⁸⁰ To explain the correlation of fire and baptism, Leese concludes, "the simplest explanation may be the influence of Zoroastrianism."⁸¹ Kappes does not correlate these in the way Leese does, possibly because she recognizes that associations between fire and light imagery, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and Christian baptism are mainstays in the early Syrian interpretive and liturgical tradition.⁸² Furthermore, these associations have left very early traces in such places as Old Latin Gospel manuscripts and Justin Martyr, bespeaking contexts of origin far removed from Zoroastrian society. The image (of font as furnace) is one of Narsai's favorite images in these *mēm̄rē*,⁸³ but its origins and establishment in the tradition were not prompted by the need for Zoroastrian contextualization.

Well-Suited but not Necessarily Adapted

Whereas key aspects of Narsai's thought as reflected in these *mēm̄rē* may be well-suited to his social context, we find no compelling evidence to rely upon theories of adaptation in order to explain them. Narsai's manner of referring to scripture

⁷⁷ Leese, "Zoroastrian Influence on Syriac Baptismal Rites," 359–360. In addition to the assertion of causality wherever he finds parallels, one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of Leese's study is the anachronistic application of late Zoroastrian practices to the analysis of ancient practices.

⁷⁸ *Mēm̄rā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.365.3–5; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33).

⁷⁹ *Mēm̄rā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.364, 16–17; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41).

⁸⁰ E. g., Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33, 36, 41, 48, 49, 55.

⁸¹ Leese, "Zoroastrian Influence on Syriac Baptismal Rites," 362.

⁸² See S. P. Brock, "Some Important Baptismal Themes in the Syrian Tradition," *The Harp* 4 (1991): 197–201; McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 106–111.

⁸³ Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 133–134.

fits his poetic style and the absence of the term Trinity from these *mēmre* is not remarkable, except in that it highlights the importance for Narsai of the term “name/s.” Narsai’s emphasis on the priest invites further exploration in an effort to clarify Narsai’s situation, but nothing in the *mēmre* suggest we need to look outside his ecclesial community to the social context for its explanation. Fire and light, an emphasis on the Spirit, combat imagery, and new creation – these themes enrich Narsai’s *mēmre*, but he inherited them, and they do not beg explanation in terms of Zoroastrian contextualization.

It may be helpful to compare the views of Kappes and Leese with that of Scott Sunquist, who concludes his analysis of “Narsai and the Persians” with a more modest proposal – that certain aspects of Syrian Christian thought and practice, as exemplified by Narsai, were well-suited to a Persian context. These “affinities that were present in Zoroastrianism” may have helped “to make Narsai’s Christianity understandable and ‘fitting,’”⁸⁴ but this is not to say that Persian ideology was their source, nor even that Narsai deliberately adapted his thought to the context. Key similarities existed between East Syrian Christian thought and Zoroastrianism – such as the purifying fire of Zoroastrianism and Narsai’s conception of the Spirit as a furnace and purifying fire, or the themes of creation and new creation in their respective doctrines of salvation.⁸⁵ The similarities could help explain the missionary impact of the East Syrian Church in a Persian context, though key differences between Narsai’s presentation of Christianity and Zoroastrianism, should not be ignored.⁸⁶ Narsai’s writings exhibit some awareness of his cultural context but not to the extent that one can gauge his degree of intentionality in adapting what he says to accommodate a Zoroastrian worldview.⁸⁷ The themes and features discussed above do not support the view that Narsai’s Zoroastrian context was the decisive element in determining the shape of his teaching and practice of baptism, since it can largely be explained in terms of the larger Syrian tradition he has inherited.

Weak Christology?

What of the accusations of weak Christology? Kappes considers it a “major weakness,” explaining that Narsai “devotes an excessive amount of attention to the role of the priest and the Spirit at the expense of the role of Jesus Christ and the Christian community ...”⁸⁸ Leaving aside the matter of determining just how

⁸⁴ Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 288.

⁸⁵ Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 194, 202–204, 249–253, 285.

⁸⁶ “Thus,” Sunquist concludes, “the similarities in the two systems made communication possible, but the challenges made conversion a necessity” (*Narsai and the Persians*, 294).

⁸⁷ See Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 107–111.

⁸⁸ Kappes, “The Voice of Many Waters,” 542.

much attention counts as “excessive,” we may examine the homilies to outline the christology they presume. We have already noticed the paucity of explicit references to the name and title of Jesus Christ in these *mēmṛē*. Allowing that the homilies are not meant to be deliberative reflections on christology so much as explications of baptismal practice, the occurrence or absence of direct mentions of the title Messiah are only partly indicative of their christology. Also significant is the christology they presume, the foundations to which they allude, and the christology in which they invite the person being baptized to participate, i.e., the christology being imaged in Narsai’s rhetoric and the elements of the rite, and ritually performed in baptism.

It is true that explicit references to Christ are rare. But simply affirming this might cause one to miss more subtle references meant to evoke christological associations in a more allusive manner, one suited to the style of Narsai’s poetry. Further, in many contexts, references to “Lord” and “King” are vague, possibly referring to Christ, though not in a clear and definite manner. For instance, in *Mēmṛā* 39 Narsai extols the priest’s role in the prebaptismal signing in terms that evoke one’s relationship with the Good Shepherd: “O person of dust, you sign the flock with the sign of its Lord, / sealing it with the name of his hiddenness by means of an overt symbol!”⁸⁹ References such as these are more allusive than direct, in which imagery interfaces with ritual to construct christological interpretations performatively rather than deliberatively.

Baptism as Enactment of Discipleship and Parable

In any case, a reading of the *mēmṛē* cannot support a view that christology is nearly absent. To begin – the very opening of *Mēmṛā* 39 directs the listener at once to see baptism against the backdrop of the christologically charged doctrine of the incarnation: “Who has the capacity sufficiently to repay love to him who fashioned the universe, / who came in his love to generate people spiritually?”⁹⁰ For Narsai, baptism is new birth, and his language here emphasizes the creator; yet it does so by underscoring the creator’s activity as begetter and the significance of his advent, subtly but definitely evoking the incarnation from the very start.

Several lines later, Narsai calls the listeners and especially those about to be baptized to pay heed to his teaching: “Come, disciples of the Master, the Messiah, let us gaze attentively / upon the spiritual writings of baptism!”⁹¹ Apart from being one of the few explicit mentions of Christ in these two *mēmṛē*, Narsai’s

⁸⁹ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.364.3–4; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 40).

⁹⁰ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.356.1–2; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33).

⁹¹ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.358.11; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 35).

identification of the listeners as “disciples” near the beginning of his discourse helps lay a foundation for what follows: their relationship with Jesus Christ as Master and Teacher, one to whose instruction they have devoted themselves and with whom they shall align themselves exclusively. This is further emphasized in the section following, where Narsai discusses the renunciation of Satan and his angels. In case his listeners are unclear as to who Satan’s angels are, Narsai names the culprits: Mani, Valentinus, Arius, Eunomius, Apollinaris, Paul (of Samosata), and especially Eutyches, “the madman.”⁹² The list is riddled with christological misfits, from Narsai’s standpoint. The mention of the monophysite Eutyches underscores Narsai’s christological concerns as a firm dyophysite. Eutyches is far more wicked than his colleagues, Narsai explains; like an innkeeper mixing drinks, “every moment he mixes up the living [divine] nature with the bodily passions (*kulšā’ kyānā hayyā bḥaššay paḡrā*).”⁹³ In *Mēmṛā* 39 Narsai has constructed the ritual of baptism as an act of discipleship expressing the candidates’ tutelage under Christ’s instructions and their exclusive allegiance to him, while also performing their denial of Satan as a repudiation of specific christological error. If they are to be disciples of the truth, Narsai explains, they must renounce this and other errors.⁹⁴ Baptism is an act of dyophysite discipleship, a decisive christological confession.

Narsai goes on to invite the listeners to entreat the King to ransom them from the Evil One,⁹⁵ alluding to a common christological atonement motif. Afterwards, he moves to an explication of baptism and salvation in terms of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32).⁹⁶ Having been styled as “disciples of truth” and discerning devotees of the Messiah, the listeners are invited to see themselves as inhabiting one of their Master’s parables and enacting one of his most celebrated characters – the younger son. Narsai returns to the subject again and in much greater detail in *Mēmṛā* 38.⁹⁷ In Narsai’s reading of the parable, each element corresponds to aspects of the candidate’s departure into exile, deliverance from slavery to Satan, and return to the King. Again, though Christ is not mentioned

⁹² *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.359–60; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 36–37). A similar list of heretics occurs in *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘On Epiphany’ (ed. McLeod 101–102). Narsai’s mention of Eutyches (d. ca. 454) may help us date these *mēmṛē* to around 450 or shortly after (Kappes, “The Voice of Many Waters,” 538 fn. 21).

⁹³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.361.11; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 37). The name of Eutyches is missing from Theodore’s parallel list (whereas Marcion’s name is absent from Narsai’s list; *Catechetical Homilies*, 40 [ed. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord’s Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist*]).

⁹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.361.13–14; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 38).

⁹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.362.12; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 39).

⁹⁶ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.362.12–24; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 39).

⁹⁷ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.347.15–21; 348, 1–10; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 52–53).

here, this section underscores baptism as an act of discipleship, a ritual in which the candidate is united with Christ's teaching and actually fulfills it.⁹⁸ Previously Narsai had described how the baptized person is adorned "as a bridegroom on the day of the marriage supper," using a richly evocative christological motif to allude again to the candidate's participation with Christ.⁹⁹ "Today that which was written comes to pass in truth,"¹⁰⁰ Narsai declares, helping the candidates experience their baptisms as a concretization of Jesus' parable. It is for their sake the parables were enacted, he explains.¹⁰¹ "Watchers and humans rejoiced – indeed they are rejoicing ... that the words in the parables have been joined to performance" (*lwāt su'rānē danqēp[w] mellē dabpelātā*).¹⁰²

Participating in Jesus' Baptism, Death, and Resurrection

Narsai alludes similarly to key moments in Christ's own life, especially his baptism and his death and resurrection, correlating them with the meaning of Christian baptism. These allusions are fairly commonplace in baptismal liturgy and in discussions of baptism, yet we must underscore them because by deploying them in these *mēmṛē*, Narsai conveys meaning that relies on christological insight. In the first, Narsai pictures the baptismal font as a "furnace of water ... erected mystically (*kurā dmayyā ... [r]āzānā'it*)" and "heated with the Spirit (*šaḡrēh bruḥā*),"¹⁰³ unmistakably recalling the scene of Jesus' baptism and the early tradition of the Jordan ablaze with fire, expressing the Spirit's presence in that scene.¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, this is a richly productive image in the Syriac tradition, one of Narsai's favorites. He refers to the baptismal waters as furnace and the Spirit's heat in other parts of both *mēmṛē* as well.¹⁰⁵ For Narsai, the furnace of baptism is principally a crucible or forge for remaking humanity and the means of purifying the soul through purgative heat.¹⁰⁶ But for the

⁹⁸ For a discussion of this parable as a frame of reference in Narsai's explication of baptism, see Witkamp, "A Critical Comparison of the So-called 'Lawsuit,'" 537–540.

⁹⁹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.346.19; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 52). See Brock, "Important Baptismal Themes," 204–207.

¹⁰⁰ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.362.16–17; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 39).

¹⁰¹ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.362.14–15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 39).

¹⁰² *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.348.8–9; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 53).

¹⁰³ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.364.16–17; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41).

¹⁰⁴ McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 106–111; idem, "Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan," 231–232.

¹⁰⁵ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.341.3; 359.5–6; 343.21–22, 24; 349.21–22; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33, 36, 48, 49, 55).

¹⁰⁶ The ideas of recasting and of purging each show up several times but also occur together:

listeners, the repeated reference draws its meaning from the Messiah's own baptism. *Mēmṛā* 38 begins, "Our Lord has opened up for us the sweet spring of Baptism,"¹⁰⁷ fixing the listeners' attention first of all on the significance of Christ's role as the candidates' forerunner in baptism, the one whose own baptism has triggered the flood of baptismal waters into which the candidates will descend. He is the one, Narsai says, who "mixed the colors for the renewal of our race, with oil and water and the invincible power of the Spirit."¹⁰⁸

Jesus' baptism is not the only such event in which Narsai's baptismal candidates are to see themselves as participants. Early in *Mēmṛā* 39, Narsai calls his audience to interpret the baptismal ritual in a spiritual sense, as the substance of their inheritance as "heirs of the covenant written in blood."¹⁰⁹ As with the aforementioned allusions to advent and ransom, the reference to blood briefly recalls a christological motif. More overt than these, however, is Narsai's repeated depiction of baptism as the candidate's participation in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. "Death and life is the mystery of Baptism," he says, "Come, let us examine the mystery of our dying in the midst of the water."¹¹⁰ This way of interpreting baptism, grounded in Romans 6:3–4, is not a prominent one in early Syriac sources, where the Jordan river, baptism as womb, and the Johannine theme of rebirth loom larger (John 3:3).¹¹¹ Narsai himself calls baptism "the womb of water" (*karsā dmayyā*).¹¹² Yet the Pauline notion of baptism as tomb (Romans 6) receives some emphasis in Theodore's homilies and becomes a significant theme in both Narsai and Jacob of Serugh, after which it occurs more commonly in

"Humans are recasting humans as in a furnace, purging from them the hateful alloy of hateful wickedness" (*Mēmṛā* 38 [ed. Mingana 1.349.21–23; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 55]).

¹⁰⁷ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342.1; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 46).

¹⁰⁸ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.341.6–7; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 46).

¹⁰⁹ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.358.12–13; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 35).

¹¹⁰ *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.364.24–25, 20–21; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 41).

¹¹¹ See McDonnell, *Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 101–02; Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 124–25, 218; Chalassery, *Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation*, 76–78; G. Winkler, "The Original Meaning of the Pre-Baptismal Anointing and its Implications," *Worship* 52 (1978): 40.

¹¹² *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.342.15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 46). See Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 72–73.

the Syriac tradition, alongside the theme of rebirth.¹¹³ The point here is the inescapably christological force of this theme in Narsai's presentation.¹¹⁴

The theme gets in-depth treatment in *Mēmṛā* 38. After comparing the officiating priest to the angel announcing the good news of "the birth of the Son,"¹¹⁵ Narsai illuminates how baptism and the gospel announced by the priest cohere:

Body and soul are buried in it, as in a tomb, and they die and live (again) in a mystery of the resurrection that is to be at the end.

...

In the grave of the water the priest buries the whole person;

...

In the door of the tomb of baptism he stands equipped, accomplishing there a mystery of death and of resurrection.

...

He repeats the names out loud, speaking as follows: "So and so is baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit."

...

With a mystery of our redeemer he goes into the bosom of baptism, in the manner of those three days within the tomb.

Three days our redeemer was among the departed: also the baptized – the three times are three days.

Truly he dies by a symbol of that death that the lifegiver of all who died, and he truly lives in a manner of the life without end.

Sin and death he strips off and casts away in baptism, in the manner of the garments that our Lord left in the tomb when he departed.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Brock, "Important Themes in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition," 192–93; Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 47; Leonel, "Four Fathers on Baptism," 56. E. C. Ratcliff argues that the incorporation of the "tomb" theme was a major departure of the early Syrian tradition due to the influence of Cyril of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem liturgy ("The Old Syrian Baptismal Tradition and its Resettlement under the Influence of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century," *SCH* 2 [1965]: 19–37). Winkler also emphasizes the womb-tomb shift in thematic focus but credits it to internal factors instead ("Original Meaning of the Pre-Baptismal Anointing," 42). Spinks challenges the notion of linear development in these processes, suggesting that local variations produced different interpretations (*Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism*, 46–47, 102–103; see also Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 497 fn. 31). What is certain is that the Pauline theme of water as grave gets very little emphasis in the early Syrian tradition through the fourth century, in favor of the Johannine theme of rebirth, until the time of Theodore, followed by Narsai and Jacob (Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 124–125).

¹¹⁴ Mitchell emphasizes this aspect of Narsai's exposition: "The effect of the washing is, of course, the participation in the death and resurrection of Christ" ("Four Fathers on Baptism," 55). Kappes acknowledges that Narsai links salvation to the action of the Son who died on the cross and invites Christians to follow his example, but her takeaway is that the baptized Christian is being called to cooperate with the Creator in the war against evil ("The Voice of Many Waters," 541–542).

¹¹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.345.9; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 50).

¹¹⁶ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.345.19–21, 22–23, 23–24; 346.4–5, 10–15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 50–51).

In this drama Christ is called the redeemer and the “lifegiver of all who died.” Baptism involves the participant in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Involvement in Jesus’ resurrection not only enables one to live a new life, putting off sin, but it anticipates the final resurrection that Christ also exemplifies.¹¹⁷ Putting off old garments recalls Jesus’ abandonment of his own garments in the tomb. The candidate confesses the Trinity, bowing his or her head three times and undergoing a triple immersion that recalls Jesus’ three days in the tomb.¹¹⁸ Having participated with Jesus in these profound ways, the candidate will rise to travel the life of the resurrection with Christ:

One man died on the cross for the sake of mortals, and he taught them to travel by the way of his death and his life.
 People depict his death and his life in baptism, and after they have died with him they have risen and have been revived mystically.
 They travel with him in the new way of the resurrection of the dead¹¹⁹

These remarks have some deliberative and explicatory elements, but for the most part they are allusive, referring to the christological foundations not only of baptism’s meaning but also of the performance of the ritual and even the christological foundations of the life into which the baptized are being inducted and will perform each day.

Preparation for Eucharist

This part of *Mēmṛā* 38 that we have just considered sets up Narsai’s discussion of the mystery of the Eucharist in which the baptized will next participate.¹²⁰ This sizable portion of the *mēmṛā* has numerous references to the Son, his body and blood, his death on the cross, and the tomb. These include the aforementioned formulae “the body of the King, the Messiah” and “the blood of the Messiah”¹²¹ that Kappes does not consider in her accounting of explicit references to Christ. Along with christologically-weighty titles such as the Son of Adam, the Begotten, and the Crucified King, this portion also uses the title “Lord” in ways that defini-

¹¹⁷ Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 105.

¹¹⁸ Some have followed Connolly’s suggestion that Narsai copied this element from Cyril (Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 51 fn. 2; e.g., see Thumpeparampil, “Mar Narsai and his Liturgical Homilies on Christian Initiation,” 132 fn. 55). Witkamp disagrees, pointing to the evidence of the practice in other early Syrian sources (Witkamp, “A Critical Comparison of the So-called ‘Lawsuit,’” 517 fn. 14; Brock, “Some Early Syriac Baptismal Commentaries,” 41).

¹¹⁹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.348.21–23; 349.1–2; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 54).

¹²⁰ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.347–56; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 52–61). See Chalassery, *Holy Spirit and Christian Initiation*, 80–82.

¹²¹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.354.22, 23; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 60).

tively denote Jesus Christ.¹²² Although it is understandable that Kappes' study of Narsai's baptismal thought would not include this portion since it focuses on the Eucharist, the section also refers repeatedly to baptism. More importantly, this portion contributes a fair amount of christologically-oriented material to complete Narsai's sermon and should be considered in arguing the claim that Narsai is deliberately minimizing christological references in his preaching in order to adapt his teaching to a Zoroastrian context. If it is difficult to see him doing so in light of the baptismal themes we have discussed in sections above, it is all the more so in view of the prominent christological references pertaining to the Eucharist and baptism in the last half of *Mēmṛā* 38.

Mēmṛā 6 'On Epiphany'

At this point, it is useful to compare these two *mēmṛē* with Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany'.¹²³ The latter focuses on Jesus' baptism; yet in it Narsai offers a great deal about Christian baptism as well, highlighting the same christological foundations underlying much of the content of *Mēmṛē* 38–39. It is worth noticing that *On Epiphany* does not mention the title Messiah and the name of Jesus occurs only once,¹²⁴ yet its subject is emphatically – even polemically – christological throughout.¹²⁵ Thomas Finn uses it in his discussion of Narsai precisely because "it explicitly integrates his Christological and his baptismal thought."¹²⁶ The *mēmṛā* emphasizes Christ's role as forerunner in baptism and the mystical participation with him that those who are baptized enjoy. The holy one sanctified the water when he entered it,¹²⁷ imparting to it "the power of the Spirit to give life" to the baptized. He "made it into a womb which begets men spiritually"; "he descended and was plunged into the womb of water as in a grave; / and he rose

¹²² E. g., "The disciples saw two in the tomb of our Lord ..." (*Mēmṛā* 38 [ed. Mingana 1.350; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 56]).

¹²³ *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany' (ed. McLeod 70–105).

¹²⁴ *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany', 504 (ed. McLeod 103).

¹²⁵ Possekel sees the *mēmṛā* as a response to theological attacks Narsai underwent in his latter years at Edessa (unpublished paper, "The Baptism of Jesus in the Theology of Narsai"). Christologically, *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany' explicates Narsai's belief that Jesus Christ functions as a bond, structuring and exemplifying the Creator's saving work of rebinding heaven and earth together (McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies*, 22–29; idem, "Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai," *TS* 42 [1981]: 461–462; Sunquist, *Narsai and the Persians*, 225–226, 255–260).

¹²⁶ T. M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria* (MFC 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), 170; see also Spinks, *Early and Medieval Theologies of Baptism*, 72–73.

¹²⁷ Whereas in the early tradition it is Christ who sanctifies the waters of baptism, in time the Holy Spirit came to be identified as the one who sanctifies the waters at the epiklesis (S. P. Brock, "The Epiklesis in the Antiochene Baptismal Ordines," in *SymSyr* I, 204–205; McDonnell, "Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan," 219–220).

and was raised (to life) and raised Adam in mystery.” By approaching baptism, “he opened the gates that were closed before men.”¹²⁸ Christ’s baptism set “the goal of life” in the waters, so that by imitating him his people could attain “the new goal of spiritual birth.”¹²⁹ This is just a brief inventory, but these references are significant christological indicators, and we see all these elements in *Mēmṛē* 38–39 as well, several of them multiple times. This comparison reinforces our understanding of Narsai’s baptismal foundations as deeply christological, challenging a reading of Narsai that sees him as minimizing christological associations in baptism for the sake of contextual adaptation. Also, whether we see the intended audience of these *mēmṛē* as lay, clerical, or mixed, the comparison helps us understand how Narsai is able to presume a christological grounding on the part of his audience – one to which he may only allude in some places, since he makes the connections explicitly in other places as well (e.g., *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’). For Narsai, the connections between Christ and Christian baptism are so strong, he concludes *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’ as follows:

This (is) the road (that) the King has traversed for us in his own person.
Come! Let us travel on it to the end as long as there is light.
Behold! There is opened the womb which begets men spiritually.
Bury mortality in baptism and acquire life!
Let everyone hear that declaration (of the Father): “This is My beloved” ...¹³⁰

Narsai leaves the listener or reader with a strong appeal to imitate Jesus Christ as the forerunner and exemplar in baptism. This is a key theme in *Mēmṛē* 38 also, as we have seen.¹³¹

Conclusion

While we may be appreciative of the way some proposals have prompted deeper investigation of these *mēmṛē*, especially with questions of context in mind, the claim that the Zoroastrian context is the decisive element in shaping Narsai’s baptismal teachings is not persuasive. Perhaps this is unsurprising, considering Narsai’s location in the northern part of the Sasanian Empire. Christian sources from the southern regions of the empire tend to display greater engagement with and influence of Zoroastrian society than we see in the north.¹³² As a thinker and teacher, Narsai owes far more to his Syrian heritage than to Zoroastrianism,

¹²⁸ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’, 289–296 (ed. McLeod 89).

¹²⁹ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’, 531–537 (ed. McLeod 103).

¹³⁰ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’, 539–543 (ed. McLeod 105); see *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.348.21–23; 349.1–2; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 54).

¹³¹ *Mēmṛā* 38 (ed. Mingana 1.348.21–23; 1.349.1–2; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 54).

¹³² See especially the treatment of Christian-Zoroastrian interaction in R.E. Payne, *A State*

though we may acknowledge that some features of the East Syrian tradition seem to have found fertile soil in Zoroastrian society, in keeping with Sunquist's analysis. More specifically, it is evident that the most pointed evidence put forward for the proposal of Zoroastrian contextualization – weak baptismal christology – has been overdrawn. *Mēmṛē* 38–39 display strong christological foundations. They are not especially innovative, in the sense of constructing new or unparalleled christological insights. They do not unpack didactically all the christological freight of the references and imagery like Theodore tends to do, but this may be due to the poetic genre of the *mēmṛē* and their context of delivery. Nor can it be argued that christology as such is the main emphasis of *Mēmṛē* 38–39. These *mēmṛē* display other baptismal themes, especially that of new creation, in which God as Creator and the Holy Spirit are most prominent. We do not see here as much of the polemical christology that characterizes some of Narsai's writings. Yet Narsai makes repeated christological connections throughout the *mēmṛē*, and christological understandings are necessary to his explication of baptism in them. Furthermore, these *mēmṛē* echo strongly the profound baptismal christology of Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany'.

In sum, the christology in *Mēmṛē* 38–39 is largely presumed rather than expounded on in detail. Yet that christology is essential not only to the listeners' understanding of baptism but also helps define the significance of the ritual's elements as it is performed and even to illuminate the shape of the disciples' life after baptism, as people who will "travel by the way of his death and life." In this sense, we find the *mēmṛē* to be christologically rich rather than weak.

The Construction of Metrical Poetry in the Homilies of Narsai of Nisibis and Jacob of Serugh*

Philip Michael Forness

Introduction

Syriac poetry forms one of the great achievements of early Christian literature. Yet the emergence and flourishing of the Syriac poetic tradition remain little studied. The composition of sermons in a strict poetic meter represents a distinct development within the Syriac homiletical tradition in Late Antiquity.¹ Syriac homilists deliberately submitted themselves to a set of metrical rules that allowed them to enhance their preaching. They made creative use of meter and played with its regularity to emphasize, contrast, and organize sections of their sermons. No detailed study of the development of the Syriac poetic tradition has appeared. This has hindered its fuller integration into the history of early Christian literature. To this end, the present article focuses on two of the foremost practitioners of the Syriac metrical homily (*mēmra*) in order to uncover the development of this tradition at this particular moment. An exploration of their construction of poetry will expose not only the individual characteristics of each author but uncover well-developed practices of composing poetry in a specific meter.

* I am grateful to Sebastian Brock, Lucas Van Rompay, J. Edward Walters, and Jeffrey Wickes for comments and suggestions on a draft of this article. I also received a number of helpful remarks during presentations of this article at the workshop “Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His Thought” and at the 2017 International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Berlin.

¹ Greek poetic homilies appear in the corpora of at least four authors, yet only in the Syriac homiletical tradition did metrical homilies become dominant. For examples of Greek homilies with poetic features, see Melito of Sardis (C. Bonner, *The Homily on the Passion by Melito Bishop of Sardis and Some Fragments of the Apocryphal Ezekiel* [Studies and Documents 12; London: Christophers, 1940], 20–27); Basil of Seleucia (F. Fenner, *De Basilio Seleuciensi Quae-stiones selectae* [Marburg: Bonnensis, 1912]); Ephrem Graecus (W. Suh, *From the Syriac Ephrem to the Greek Ephrem: A Case Study of the Influence of Ephrem’s Isosyllabic Sermons* [Memre] on Greek-Speaking Christianity [Ph.D. Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000]); E. Lash, “Metrical Texts of Greek Ephrem,” *SP* 35 [2001]: 433–448; T. F. Crowell, *The Biblical Homilies of Ephraem Graecus* [Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 2016], 91–103.; and Pseudo-John Chrysostom (S. G. Mercati, “Antica omelia metrica εις την Χριστου γενναν,” *Biblica* 1 [1920]: 75–90).

Manolis Papoutsakis's monograph on Late Antique Syriac political theology calls for an investigation of two of Ephrem the Syrian's (d. 373) greatest heirs: Narsai (d. ca. 500) and his younger contemporary Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451–521).² Papoutsakis's own article on Jacob's and Narsai's views of the ascension of Christ has demonstrated the possibilities of understanding the rivalry of these homilists through a detailed examination of their exegesis and diction.³ A historically unverifiable, yet memorable anecdote regarding the rivalry between Narsai and Jacob appears in the ecclesiastical history of the Church of the East author Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya (late 6th/early 7th centuries). He states that Jacob "began beautifully constructing his heresy and his error in the form of the homilies that he constructed, for through the sweet construction of enticing sounds he made common people turn back from the glorious one (i.e., Narsai)."⁴ In turn, Narsai "composed the true orthodox thinking by way of homilies, which was apt for sweet melodies."⁵ Previous studies have compared the works of these two preachers thematically.⁶ This study seeks to shed additional light on their relationship and the poetic tradition from which they emerged by examining their use of three different poetical devices.

² M. Papoutsakis, *Vicarious Kingship: A Theme in Syriac Political Theology in Late Antiquity* (STAC 100; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 5. All dates in this article for individual authors follow *GEDSH*.

³ M. Papoutsakis, "United in the Strife that Divided Them: Jacob of Serugh and Narsai on the Ascension of Christ," *Δεῦτιο Βιβλικὸν Μελετῶν* 32 (2017): 45–77.

⁴ Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya, *Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (ed. and trans. F. Nau, *L'Histoire de Barḥadbešabba 'Arbaia* [PO 9.5, 23.2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1913–1932], 1.124; trans. A. H. Becker, *Sources for the History of the School of Nisibis* [TTH 50; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008], 69). All translations in this article are my own. Citations of other translations have been provided for reference.

Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya draws here on a tradition of highlighting the enticing qualities of Syriac poetry. See Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies*, 1.17.1–3 (ed. and trans. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen contra haereses* [CSCO 169–170; Leuven: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1957], 1.5); Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem*, 23–25 (ed. and trans. J. P. Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Sarug* [PO 47.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995], 30–31); *Life of Ephrem the Syrian*, 31 (ed. and trans. J. P. Amar, *The Syriac "Vita" Tradition of Ephrem the Syrian* [CSCO 629–630; Leuven: Peeters, 2011], 1.70–74, 2.76–80). I am grateful to Jeffrey Wickes for bringing these sources to my attention.

⁵ Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya, *Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (ed. and trans. Nau, *L'Histoire*, 1.124; trans. Becker, *Sources*, 69).

⁶ See T. Jansma (trans. L.-M. Gauthier), "L'hexaméron de Jacques de Sarūg," *OS* 4 (1959): 271–284; S. P. Brock, "Poetry," in R. Jabre-Mouawad (ed.), *Nos sources: Art et littérature syriaques* (Sources syriaques 1; Antélias, Lebanon: Centre d'Études et de Recherches Orientales, 2005), 265–268; L. Van Rompay, "Humanity's Sin in Paradise: Ephrem, Jacob of Sarug, and Narsai in Conversation," in G. A. Kiraz (ed.), *Jacob of Serugh and His Times: Studies in Sixth-Century Syriac Christianity* (GECS 8; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 199–217.

Sources and Methods

Narsai and Jacob of Serugh constructed most of their homilies in a common meter. Syllable count rather than length or stress served as the basis for this meter, as is the case for Syriac poetry in general.⁷ This meter consists of isosyllabic couplets in which each line consists of three four-syllable feet (4 + 4 + 4 / 4 + 4 + 4). Following Sebastian Brock, I will refer to this meter as twelve-syllable couplets.⁸ This shared meter enables a comparison that discloses similarities and differences in the ways that each author constructed poetry. The examination of this meter is based on ten homilies by Narsai and twelve by Jacob, which amount to a similar number of metrical lines (4,855 for Narsai and 4,684 for Jacob).

For Narsai, I have selected ten homilies that span his corpus. The homilies, with bibliographical information, are:

Mēmra 1 'On the Divine Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)' (ed. Mingana 1.1–28)⁹

Mēmra 18 'On the Departed and the Resurrection' (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.743–764)

Mēmra 24 'On Lent IV' (ed. Mingana 1.195–210)

Mēmra 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins' (ed. Mingana 1.243–257)

Mēmra 29 'On Palm Sunday' (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.382–393)¹⁰

Mēmra 37 'On the Repentant Thief' (ed. Mingana 1.327–340)

Mēmra 44 'On the New Creation "New Sunday"' (ed. Mingana 2.54–72)

Mēmra 73 'On Samson' (ed. Mingana 2.303–314)

Mēmra 75 'On Solomon' (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.796–812)

Mēmra 76 'On Enoch and Elijah' (ed. Frishman 3–20)

For Jacob of Serugh, I examined a set of homilies found in the fifth volume of Paul Bedjan's edition.¹¹ I have numbered them according to Bedjan's edition. Yet I also note two numbering systems developed by Sebastian Brock based on the incipits:¹²

⁷ S. P. Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3): Syriac," in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 657–658.

⁸ Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3)," 663; Brock, "Poetry," 255.

⁹ One line appears to be missing from this homily in the edition. See Narsai, *Mēmra* 1 (ed. Mingana 1.5–7). I have been unable to restore the missing line after examining the Patriarchal Press edition of this homily as well as nine manuscripts that transmit this homily. Accordingly, these three lines do not factor into the consideration of couplets below.

¹⁰ One line is lacking from the Patriarchal Press edition of this homily. See Narsai, *Mēmra* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.387.5–7). Fortunately, it has been possible to restore the missing line. Between lines 4 and 5 on page 387, the text should read: 'o puššāqā damlē kollēh marrāhūtā. I have restored this line from four manuscripts: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Sachau 174–176, fol. 170v; Diyarbakır, Mar Serkis Chaldean Catholic Church, 70, fol. 193v (now available through the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library: CCM 578); London, British Library, Or. 9368, fol. 162v; and Rome, Vatican Library, Borg. sir. 83, fol. 129r.

¹¹ P. Bedjan, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910).

¹² B¹ refers to the system in S. P. Brock, "The Published Verse Homilies of Isaac of Antioch, Jacob of Serugh, and Narsai: Index of Incipits," *JSS* 32 (1987): 279–313; B² to that in P. Bedjan and S. P. Brock, *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006), 6.373–411.

- Mēmārā* 147 (B² 39 = B¹ 60) 'On Cain and Abel 1' (ed. Bedjan 5.1–16)
Mēmārā 148 (B² 356 = B¹ 511) 'On Cain and Abel 2' (ed. Bedjan 5.17–32)
Mēmārā 149 (B² 317 = B¹ 462) 'On Cain and Abel 3' (ed. Bedjan 5.32–47)
Mēmārā 150 (B² 177 = B¹ 269) 'On Cain and Abel 4' (ed. Bedjan 5.47–61)
Mēmārā 151 (B² 83 = B¹ 125) 'On Sodom 1' (ed. Bedjan 5.61–77)
Mēmārā 152 (B² 214 = B¹ 321) 'On Sodom 2' (ed. Bedjan 5.78–96)
Mēmārā 153 (B² 280 = B¹ 406) 'On Sodom 3' (ed. Bedjan 5.96–116)
Mēmārā 154 (B² 311 = B¹ 448) 'On Sodom 4' (ed. Bedjan 5.117–153)
Mēmārā 155 (B² 289 = B¹ 419) 'On Melchizedek' (ed. Bedjan 5.154–180)
Mēmārā 160 (B² 134 = B¹ 202) 'On Samson' (ed. Bedjan 5.331–355)
Mēmārā 161 (B² 123 = B¹ 180) 'On the Fall of the Chosen' (ed. Bedjan 5.355–367)
Mēmārā 175 (B² 49 = B¹ 75) 'On the Passover of the Law' (ed. Bedjan 5.631–641)

The study of formal aspects of Syriac poetry remains a developing area of research.¹³ A publication of Jacob of Serugh's poetry in the mid-nineteenth century still had to defend the Syriac poetic tradition as "not worthless."¹⁴ Publications of historical manuals for composing poetry followed later in the nineteenth century,¹⁵ and the first extended study of Syriac poetry as a whole appeared in 1932 but was quickly criticized.¹⁶ Very recent studies on Syriac psalmody and hymnody as well as on Ephrem the Syrian's poetry present promising avenues for future research.¹⁷ Only a few studies have appeared on the formal aspects of twelve-syllable couplets.¹⁸

The absence of stress as an organizing principal within Syriac poetry problematizes the use of many contemporary theoretical discussions of meter. Yet this study has benefitted from engagement with at least two trends in metrical analysis. First, poets choose to tweak their language in order to meet the criteria of specific meters. Their use of meter limits their ability to use certain words and

¹³ Brock, "Poetry and Hymnography (3)," provides a more extensive overview of the secondary literature. For an overview of the tradition itself, see Brock, "Poetry."

¹⁴ P. Zingerle, "Proben syrischer Poesie aus Jakob von Sarug," *ZDMG* 12 (1858): 117.

¹⁵ J.-P. P. Martin, *De la métrique chez les Syriens* (AKM, 7.2; Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1879); M. Sprengling, "Antonius Rhetor on Versification with an Introduction and Two Appendices," *AJSLL* 32 (1916): 145–216; M. Sprengling, "Severus Bar Shakkō's Poetics, Part II," *AJSLL* 32 (1916): 293–308.

¹⁶ G. Hölscher, *Syrische Verskunst* (LSS 5; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1932). Hölscher's argument that Syriac poetry was based on stress and not just on syllable count has not proven convincing, as seen already in G. Bergsträßer, "Review of G. Hölscher, *Syrische Verskunst* (LSS 5; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1932)," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 36 (1933): 748–754.

¹⁷ U. R. Nieten, *Struktur und Metrum in den syrisch-aramäischen Psalmen und Hymnen* (SSB 12; Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2013); P. Stevenson, *Stanzaic Syntax in the Madrashe of Ephrem the Syrian* (MPI 22; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹⁸ J. G. Blum, "Zum Bau von Abschnitten in Memre von Jacob von Sarug," in *SymSyr* III, 307–321; K. E. McVey, "The Memra of Narsai on the Three Nestorian Doctors as an Example of Forensic Rhetoric," in *SymSyr* III, 87–96; M. Papoutsakis, "Formulaic Language in the Metrical Homilies of Jacob of Serugh," in *SymSyr* VII, 445–451. I have unfortunately not had access to M. Papoutsakis, *Jacob of Serugh, the Homily of the Deluge (Lines 1–210): Introduction, Translation, and Detailed Commentary* (D.Phil. Thesis, The University of Oxford, 2000).

phrases and thereby generates in part what poets say.¹⁹ Second, deviations from a regular meter create tension within poetry. My discussion of tension draws on examinations of the function of meter both for the poet and for the audience.²⁰ As a whole, I hope to build a foundation for understanding Narsai's and Jacob's meter through a description of the features of their poetry.

Reading and Writing Twelve-Syllable Couplets

The near contemporaries Narsai and Jacob made extensive use of twelve-syllable couplets. Narsai composed sixty-seven of his seventy-nine extant homilies in this meter,²¹ and Jacob of Serugh composed over three hundred homilies in twelve-syllable couplets.²² Part of the corpus attributed to Isaac of Antioch dates to the fifth century and could provide earlier examples of this meter.²³ Descriptions of

¹⁹ An article that analyzes Geoffrey Chaucer's use of iambic pentameter helped inaugurate this approach and proved instructive for my examination of twelve-syllable couplets: M. Halle and S. J. Keyser, "Chaucer and the Study of Prosody," *College English* 28 (1966): 187–219. For concise surveys of the development of such analyses, see K. Hanson, "Generative Metrics: The State of the Art," in C. Küper (ed.), *Current Trends in Metrical Analysis* (Littera 2; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2011), 45–62; C. O. Hartman, *Verse: An Introduction to Prosody* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 240–247.

²⁰ In this regard, two studies of the function of meter provided a helpful frame for my reflection on twelve-syllable couplets: S. B. Chatman, *A Theory of Meter* (JL 36; The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 184–224; J. Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 135–164. For a succinct overview of the various functions of meter, see T. V. F. Brogan, "Meter," in *NPEPP*, 775–776.

²¹ Within the corpus of eighty-one homilies attributed to Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 35 and *Mēmṛā* 43 are not considered authentic. Both of these homilies feature twelve-syllable couplets. On the inauthenticity of *Mēmṛā* 35, see S. P. Brock, "Diachronic Aspects of Syriac Word Formation," in *SymSy* V, 321–330; L. Abramowski, "Die liturgische Homilie des Ps. Narses mit dem Messbekenntnis und einem Theodor-Zitat," *BJRULM* 78 (1996): 87–100. *Mēmṛā* 43 also circulated under Jacob of Serugh's name. See Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 56 (Br² 162 = Br¹ 244) (ed. Bedjan 2.636–649).

²² On the number of Jacob's homilies, the most recent listings can be found in R.-Y. Akhrass, "A List of Homilies of Mar Jacob of Serugh," *SOPJ* 53 (2015): 87–161; R.-Y. Akhrass and I. Syryany, *160 Unpublished Homilies of Jacob of Serugh* (Damascus: Bab Touma Press, 2017), l.xiv–xxiii. Eight prose homilies attributed to Jacob remain extant. Six appear in F. Rilliet, *Jacques de Saroug: Six homélies festales en prose* (PO 43.4; Turnhout: Brepols, 1986). An additional two prose homilies have been recently identified and edited in Akhrass and Syryany, *160 Unpublished Homilies*, 2.635–636, 637–639. The five *Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theater*, of which homilies two through five are written in a seven-syllable meter, do not seem to be authentic. See C. Moss, "Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles of the Theatre," *Le Muséon* 48 (1935): 87–112.

²³ On the three Isaacs that may have authored portions of this corpus, see E. G. Mathews, Jr., "Ishaq of Amid," in *GEDSH*, 212–213; "Ishaq of Antioch," in *GEDSH*, 213; "Ishaq of Edessa," in *GEDSH*, 213. A preliminary attempt to distinguish these authors appears in T. Bou Mansour, "Une clé pour la distinction des écrits des Isaac d'Antioche," *ETL* 79 (2003): 365–402. On the homilies themselves, see E. G. Mathews, Jr., "A Bibliographical Clavis to the Corpus of Works

this meter from authors within the Syriac tradition grant insight into the process of reading and writing twelve-syllable couplets.

A letter of Jacob of Edessa (ca. 630–708) provides the first description of this meter. He responded to John the Stylite of Litarba (d. 737/8) regarding a question about the content of some metrical homilies.²⁴ He advises John to be wary of texts that are attributed to Jacob of Serugh but that contain content foreign to Jacob of Serugh's thought. In this context, he sets a benchmark for identifying Jacob of Serugh's genuine works based on their meter. He states that Jacob, "throughout all of his metrical homilies, did not write anything that was not in a certain meter of twelve syllables and divided into three sections,²⁵ each of four syllables."²⁶ Jacob of Edessa presupposes that John of Litarba would be able to recognize even the most basic compositional element of twelve-syllable couplets, namely, the four-syllable foot. This assumption suggests that highly educated readers of Syriac metrical homilies could understand not only the content but also the formal aspects of the poetry.

Four later authors from the Syriac tradition described twelve-syllable couplets in manuals for composing Syriac poetry. Antony of Tagrit (9th century),²⁷ Jacob bar Shakko (d. 1241),²⁸ and Philoxenos Yuḥanon Dolabani (1885–1969)²⁹ each identify the twelve-syllable line as the central feature of this meter but do not discuss any further divisions. But Iṣṭifān al-Duwayhī (1630–1704) offers a rather different description. In one location, he points to the four-syllable foot as the basic element of twelve-syllable couplets, stating that poetic "verse whose foundation is on four sounds is in the name of Mar Jacob."³⁰ Al-Duwayhī emphasizes the four-syllable foot as the foundational unit of Jacob's poetry in distinction to the

Attributed to Isaac of Antioch," *Hugoye* 5 (2002): 3–14; idem, "The Works Attributed to Isaac of Antioch: A[nother] Preliminary Checklist," *Hugoye* 6 (2003): 51–76.

²⁴ Jacob of Edessa, *First Letter to John the Stylite of Litarba* (ed. R. Schröter, "Erster Brief Jakob's von Edessa an Johannes den Styliten," *ZDMG* 24 [1870]: 268–269). On this letter, see J. Tannous, *Between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak* (Ph.D. Diss., Princeton University, 2010), 189–193.

²⁵ The Syriac word for "sections" (*qupsē*) is a loan word from the Greek word "cube" (κύβος). R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 2.3554, cites this text alone in support of a translation of "cube, square" ("tessera, quadra"). Perhaps the square sides that make up the surface area of a cube recommended this term to describe four-syllable feet.

²⁶ Jacob of Edessa, *First Letter to John the Stylite of Litarba* (ed. Schröter, "Erster Brief," 269–270).

²⁷ Antony of Tagrit simply labels the meter dodecasyllabic. See Anton of Tagrit, *Rhetoric*, 5.10 (ed. and trans. J. W. Watt, *The Fifth Book of the Rhetoric of Anthony of Tagrit* [CSCO 480–481; Leuven: Peeters, 1986], 1.48, 2.39).

²⁸ Jacob bar Shakko quotes six twelve-syllable lines, each divided into three four-syllable feet. He then lists this as one among several options for the division of a dodecasyllabic line into feet. See Jacob bar Shakko, *Book of Dialogues*, 1.3.4 (Martin, *De la métrique*, 26–27, with fn. 3).

²⁹ P. Y. Dolabani, *Pu'itūto* (Aleppo, 1970), 38, simply labels the meter dodecasyllabic.

³⁰ Iṣṭifān al-Duwayhī, *The Syriac Model Strophes and their Meters* (ed. L. Hage, *The Syriac Model Strophes and Their Poetic Meters* [BUSE 14; Kaslik: University of the Holy Spirit, 1987], 3a–4a, 38).

five syllables of the meter of Balai (early 5th century) and the seven of Ephrem.³¹ Al-Duwayhī's description offers insight into the process of composing poetry in twelve-syllable couplets, where the most restrictive element – the four-syllable foot – receives emphasis over the other more flexible elements of the poetry.

Modern scholarship has accurately described the meter used in most of the homilies of Narsai and Jacob as twelve-syllable couplets. Yet as early as the turn of the seventh-century, Jacob of Edessa emphasized the more basic compositional units of the four-syllable foot and the twelve-syllable line. Examining the poetry of Jacob and Narsai with attention not only to the construction of couplets but also to these elements will enable a reading that is closer to the perspective of those who read and composed works in this meter. This article accordingly proceeds from the most to least restrictive units of twelve-syllable couplets in order to examine how Narsai and Jacob constructed poetry within this meter.

The Construction of Metrical Feet: Anaphora³²

Metrical feet consisting of four syllables stand as the most stringent requirement of twelve-syllable couplets. Indeed, this unit sets twelve-syllable couplets apart from other forms of twelve-syllable verse known in the Greek and Syriac traditions.³³ Narsai and Jacob each exploit the possibilities of four-syllable feet to enhance their homilies. Both authors make extensive use of the poetic device of anaphora, which describes the repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive lines and couplets.³⁴

Manolis Papoutsakis's study of four-syllable formulae exposes consistencies in Jacob of Serugh's construction of this metrical unit. Papoutsakis identifies two types of four-syllable formulae. The first type of formula proves identifiable through its grammatical form. Jacob's frequent use of four-syllable adverbs ending in *-ā'it* in the third metrical foot of a line forms one well-known example. But other grammatical features used in this regard include *pa'el* infinitives, *'etpa'el*

³¹ Istifān al-Duwayhī, *The Syriac Model Strophes and their Meters* (ed. Hage, *The Syriac Model Strophes and Their Poetic Meters*, 15a, 74).

³² Several of the articles in this volume analyze other instances of anaphora in Narsai's *mēm̄rē*. On *Mēm̄rā* 14 (ed. Mingana 1.141.3–7) and *Mēm̄rā* 19 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.596.6–11), see R.A. Kitchen in this volume (pp. 145–159); on *Mēm̄rā* 54 (ed. Mingana 2.119.3–9), see K.B. Gibson in this volume (pp. 117–132), and on *Mēm̄rā* 66 (ed. Mingana 2.238.4–17; 2.251.7–9), see J.E. Walters in this volume (pp. 227–253).

³³ On the Greek tradition of twelve-syllable verse, see P. Maas, "Der byzantinische Zwölfsilber," *BZ* 12 (1903): 278–323; A. Rhoby, "Vom jambischen Trimeter zum byzantinischen Zwölfsilber: Beobachtung zur Metrik des spätantiken und byzantinischen Epigramms," *WS* 124 (2011): 117–142. For variations in the Syriac tradition, as noted above, see Jacob bar Shakkō, *Book of Dialogues*, 1.3.4 (ed. Martin, *De la métrique*, 26–27, with fn. 3).

³⁴ T.V.F. Brogan, "Anaphora," in *NPEPP*, 73, notes that anaphora describes such repetition at the beginning of phrases, clauses, and sentences.

infinitives, four-syllable abstract nouns ending in *-utā*, as well as specific types of adjectives and participles.³⁵ The second type of formula consists of words that appear in the same form regardless of their position in the sentence or their grammatical function.³⁶ Papoutsakis demonstrates the interpretive importance of the second type.³⁷

Both Narsai and Jacob regularly repeat words at the beginning of lines and couplets. The poetic device of anaphora describes this pattern. For example, the first seven couplets of Narsai's *Mēmra* 44 'On the New Creation "New Sunday"' begin either with the word "one" (*ḥaḍ*) followed by a three-syllable noun or with "one is" (*ḥaḍ [h]u*) followed by a two-syllable noun.³⁸ In the twenty-two homilies consulted for this article, I identified seventy examples of anaphora that recur three or more times.³⁹ Only one homily does not feature this poetic device at all.⁴⁰ All of these anaphora repeat phrases that are four syllables or fewer.⁴¹ Anaphoras

³⁵ Papoutsakis, "Formulaic Language," 447–448.

³⁶ He labels these *formulae proper* (Papoutsakis, "Formulaic Language," 448).

³⁷ Papoutsakis, "Formulaic Language," 448–451. Keen attention to the construction of poetry characterizes Papoutsakis's investigations of Jacob's poetry elsewhere: M. Papoutsakis, "The Making of a Syriac Fable: From Ephrem to Romanos," *Le Muséon* 120 (2007): 29–75; Papoutsakis, *Vicarious Kingship*.

³⁸ Narsai, *Mēmra* 44 (ed. Mingana 2.54.19–55.8). Three-syllable nouns appear in lines 2.54.19–20; 2.55.5: "creator" (*bāroyā*), "will" (*ṣebyānā*), and "power" (*ṣultānā*). Two-syllable nouns appear in lines 2.55.1, 3–4, 7: "lord" (*mārā*), "nature" (*kyānā*), "signal" (*remzā*), and "hidden one" (*kasyā*).

³⁹ I have only included anaphoras that are repeated at least three times. Shorter examples of anaphora do appear in these homilies and would significantly increase the number of instances listed here. I identified forty-six examples in nine homilies of Narsai. See Narsai, *Mēmra* 1 (ed. Mingana 1.9.5–9; 1.13.21–14.2; 1.16.9–13; 1.19.11–17; 1.27.8–25); *Mēmra* 18 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.743.7–22; 1.747.3–23; 1.755.19–24; 1.762.15–22); *Mēmra* 24 (ed. Mingana 1.197.10–14; 1.200.11–15; 1.200.16–20.1.8; 1.204.22–205.1; 1.205.11–15; 1.206.8–13; 1.207.17–21; 1.208.2–8; 1.208.11–22); *Mēmra* 27 (ed. Mingana 1.244.2–8; 1.251.15–21; 1.255.8–12); *Mēmra* 37 (ed. Mingana 1.328.19–329.5; 1.329.20–330.2; 1.331.6–10; 1.331.10–14; 1.334.6–10; 1.334.20–25; 1.335.11–14; 1.335.17–21; 1.336.21–25; 1.339.5–10; 1.339.16–20; 1.340.3–12); *Mēmra* 44 (ed. Mingana 2.54.19–55.8; 2.62.4–9; 2.62.20–63.3; 2.68.10–15; 2.71.20–25); *Mēmra* 73 (ed. Mingana 2.305.19–23; 2.310.1–6; 2.310.20–24); *Mēmra* 75 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.804.23–805.12; 2.810.5–811.4; 2.811.5–20; 2.811.21–812.2); *Mēmra* 76 (ed. Frishman 12.307–312).

I identified twenty-four examples in the twelve homilies of Jacob that I examined. See Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmra* 147 (ed. Bedjan 5.4.8–19); *Mēmra* 148 (ed. Bedjan 5.20.13–21.1; 5.21.18–22.2; 5.24.13–25.2); *Mēmra* 149 (ed. Bedjan 5.37.1–8; 5.38.7–12; 5.43.5–10); *Mēmra* 150 (ed. Bedjan 5.50.5–10; 5.56.5–10; 5.58.7–16); *Mēmra* 151 (ed. Bedjan 5.64.1–6; 5.70.6–11; 5.75.13–20); *Mēmra* 152 (ed. Bedjan 5.84.19–85.6; 5.89.7–12); *Mēmra* 153 (ed. Bedjan 5.109.9–18; 5.114.4–9); *Mēmra* 154 (ed. Bedjan 5.143.19–144.2; 5.146.14–19); *Mēmra* 155 (ed. Bedjan 5.157.11–158.4; 5.175.17–176.5); *Mēmra* 160 (ed. Bedjan 5.353.21–354.3); *Mēmra* 161 (ed. Bedjan 5.361.12–14); *Mēmra* 175 (ed. Bedjan 5.633.7–12).

⁴⁰ Narsai, *Mēmra* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.382–393), does not contain any examples of anaphora.

⁴¹ Some shorter segments may feature longer periods of repetition. One of Narsai's homilies that I have not examined here features two couplets that contain a longer anaphora. Narsai, *Mēmra* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.360.6–10), comprises three successive couplets. The first two couplets begin with the same six-syllable phrase: "Among his angels is ..." (*men mala'kaw[hy]*

Anaphoras not only provide emphasis in their homilies but also enhance their narratives. A section of Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 75 '*On Solomon*' serves as an instructive example. In this part of the homily, Narsai narrates Solomon's ruling between two women who claim to be the mother of a child (1 Kgs 3:16–28). He contrasts the women and begins with praise for the true mother's nature:

[illegible]

Yea, nature! How it moved with jealousy and made a request of its love
And did not become faint at the time of war with its enemy!
Yea! How it fought valiantly against the sword
And did not allow it to break through the array of its zeal!
Yea! How it persisted to battle lovingly
And did not succumb and become dispirited at the command of the king and his army!
Yea, merciful prostitute! How her mercy was stirred,
For she⁴² gave her baby to the impudent one only so that he might live!
Woe, cruel fool! How little pity she had,
For she asked that the living baby might die so that she might not be exposed!
Woe! How she possessed shamelessly a heart of stone,
For she did not become tender when a sword looked towards the child!
Woe! How the impudent one cried out before the son of David,
“He will be neither mine nor yours. Let him die being cut in two!”⁴³

⁴³ Narsai, *Mēmra* 75 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.804.23–805.12).

The poetic device of anaphora serves several functions in this quotation. First, it provides an organizational function. The repetition of the one-syllable interjection “yea” (ēw)⁴⁴ in the first four couplets and the slightly different one-syllable interjection “woe” (ʾo) in the final three couplets marks this passage as a distinct unit within the homily. Further, the transition from one anaphora to another indicates an internal break within the set of seven lines.⁴⁵ The change in interjection matches the narrative shift from the merciful prostitute to the cruel fool. The first interjection seems to carry positive valences, while the second is neutral or, as it seems in this case, negative.

Second, parallels in the construction of metrical feet allow Narsai to signal narrative changes to his audience. This quotation features two patterns of the construction of anaphora. First, the first metrical feet of the first, fourth, and fifth couplets all begin with a one-syllable interjection followed by the preposition *l-* and a substantive to fill out the four syllables. Each of these couplets marks a change in the central actor of the narrative: the “nature” (*lakyānā*) in the first couplet, the “prostitute” (*lzānītā*) in the fourth, and the “fool” (*lšāṭiṭā*) in the fifth. The second pattern of anaphora appears in the second, third, and final two couplets. The first metrical foot in each of these couplets begins with a one-syllable interjection followed by the one-syllable word “how” (*kmā*). The remaining two syllables consist of verbs or verbal phrases. These lines narrate the actions of the three different agents in this passage.

Third, a slight variation in the construction of the metrical feet in the fourth and fifth couplets marks a major contrast in the narrative. In the fourth couplet, Narsai switches the pattern of the anaphora. This indicates a change in the agent – from the “nature” to the “prostitute.” The fifth couplet features another change in agent – from the “prostitute” to the “fool.” Narsai highlights this shift by switching from the interjection “yea” (ēw) in the fourth couplet to the interjection “woe” (ʾo) in the fifth. This change focuses attention on the contrast

⁴⁴ A. M. Butts, *Language Change in the Wake of Empire: Syriac in Its Greco-Roman Context* (Ph.D. Diss., The University of Chicago, 2013), 265 fn. 122, expresses some doubt on whether “yea” (ēw) may be a Greek loanword from εὖ or ὦ. On the derivation of this interjection from Greek, see also Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, 1.140; C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon syriacum* (2nd ed.; Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), 14; M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin: Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon syriacum* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 32.

⁴⁵ A similar example of this alternation appears in Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 39 (ed. Mingana 1.356.14–19). The first two couplets begin with ʾo, while the final two couplets begin with ēw. Narsai and Jacob both change between different or similar forms of words in their use of anaphoras depending on grammatical or metrical needs. For example, Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 44 (ed. Mingana 2.62.20–63.3), switches between two forms of the word “why?” (*lmān* and *lmānā*) according to metrical needs. Similarly, Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 155 (ed. Bedjan 5.157.11–158.4), alternates between the negative particles *lā* and *law* depending on whether the following word is a verb. Likewise, Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 149 (ed. Mingana 5.38.7–12), alternates between the masculine and feminine forms of “seven” (*šabā* and *šbaʾ*) according to the gender of the following noun.

between the two women at the center of this narrative. This passage demonstrates how Narsai uses the smallest metrical unit – the foot – to enhance the narrative of his homily.

This excerpt from Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 75 'On Solomon' represents the widespread use of anaphora in Narsai's and Jacob's homilies. Narsai's sermons examined for this study feature nearly twice as many anaphora as Jacob's.⁴⁶ *Mēmṛā* 75 even concludes with a sequence of three sets of anaphora, forming a crescendo at the homily's end.⁴⁷ Yet I discerned no differences in their construction of this poetic device nor in its function within their poetry. Their use of this device associated with the metrical foot evidences a common tradition of constructing poetry.

The Construction of Metrical Lines: Caesura

For both Narsai and Jacob, the metrical line ordinarily functioned as a distinct unit of meaning. Both authors regularly constructed lines so that individual feet contained specific grammatical elements with the result that they could often arrange the feet interchangeably. This section examines how Narsai and Jacob utilized the regular construction of lines meaningfully. It then analyzes their use of the poetic device of syntactic caesura – a break in syntax within a metrical foot – to deviate from such norms and thereby create local emphasis.⁴⁸

The section of Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 75 'On Solomon' discussed earlier exhibits a typical pattern of construction of metrical lines in Narsai's and Jacob's poetry. Each of the metrical feet serves a distinct function. The fourth and fifth couplets, as noted earlier, feature a slight switch in the use of anaphora to distinguish the two women in the narrative:

حَقّاً كَلِمَةً تَسْمَعُ:	تُسَمِّعُ:	يَمُ كَلِمَةً:
دَجَلَسَ دَجَلَسَ دَجَلَسَ:	لَسَمَ لَسَمَ لَسَمَ:	دَيَسَ دَيَسَ دَيَسَ:
حَقّاً كَلِمَةً:	تُسَمِّعُ:	يَمُ كَلِمَةً:
دَجَلَسَ دَجَلَسَ دَجَلَسَ:	لَسَمَ لَسَمَ لَسَمَ:	دَيَسَ دَيَسَ دَيَسَ:

Yea, merciful prostitute! How her mercy was stirred,
For she gave her baby to the impudent one only so that he might live!
Woe, cruel fool! How little pity she had,
For she asked that the living baby might die so that she might not be exposed!⁴⁹

Narsai constructs these lines to emphasize the contrast between the two women.

The first line in each of these couplets exhibits parallel structures. The first metrical feet address the two women using an interjection followed by a pre-

⁴⁶ See fn. 39 above.

⁴⁷ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 75 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.810.5–811.4; 2.811.5–20; 2.811.21–812.2).

⁴⁸ On the various definitions of caesura, see T.V.F. Brogan, "Caesura," in *NPEPP*, 158–160.

⁴⁹ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 75 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.805.5–8).

position (*l-*) and a three-syllable substantivized adjective. The second metrical feet feature adjectives with similar endings – indeed, the adjectives “merciful” (*raḥmāniṭā*) and “cruel” (*ḥarmāniṭā*) flip two consonants but are otherwise identical.⁵⁰ The third metrical feet contain phrases beginning with “how” (*kmā*).

The second line of each couplet similarly starts with the actions of the women. They begin with the conjunction “for” (*d-*) followed by third-person singular feminine verbs.⁵¹ The second metrical feet of these lines do not parallel each other. But the third metrical feet both begin with the conjunction “so that” (*d-*).⁵² Narsai constructed the second lines in these couplets in a similar fashion. Each line begins with a conjunction and contains both a main and a dependent clause. He draws attention to this similarity by constructing two of the three feet with identical grammatical functions. The parallel construction of these lines helps him to contrast the two women in this narrative.

Both authors deviate from the normal construction of lines on occasion. For instance, each author uses the poetic device of caesura in which a grammatical boundary between two clauses appears within a single metrical foot.⁵³ Jacob’s *Mēmra* 161 ‘On the Fall of the Chosen’ discusses the downfall of Samson and Solomon through their lust. He writes about Solomon:

ܡܠܟܐ ܩܕܝܫ ܫܥܐ:	ܫܥܐ ܕܥܝܕ ܫܥܐ:	ܝܬܪܝܬܐ ܕܐܬ
ܕܟܝܢ ܝܬܥܬܕ ܕܝܫ:	ܕܝܬܥܬܕ ܕܝܫ	ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ
ܡܡ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ:	ܕܝܬܟܝܢ:	ܡܝܬܝܬܝܬܐ
ܝܬܥܬܕ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ:	ܕܝܬܟܝܢ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ	ܡܢ ܕܟܝܢ
ܡܡ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ:	ܕܝܬܟܝܢ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ	ܡܠܟܐ ܡܠܟܐ
ܕܝܬܟܝܢ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ:	ܕܝܬܟܝܢ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ	ܕܝܬܟܝܢ ܕܝܬܟܝܢ

If (Solomon) had not repented, look!, he would have fallen and not risen.
 His Lord did not prevent him, when he was denying him, from denying him.
 For this reason, God is above blame,
 When he does not prevent the chosen one from falling if he himself wants (to do so).

⁵⁰ Both adjectives are formed by adding *-ān* plus the insertion of the feminine morpheme *-i*. On this formation, see T. Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar* (trans. J. A. Crichton; London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 49, 78–79; A. M. Butts, “The Etymology and Derivation of the Syriac Adverbial Ending *-i*,” *JNES* 69 (2010): 79–86.

⁵¹ As noted in footnote 42 above, “for” (*d-*) could also be translated as a relative conjunction “who.”

⁵² The conjunction *d-* introduces various subordinate clauses, including causal, final, and relative. Whether the following verb is perfect or imperfect determines the translation. On the various syntactic functions of the conjunction *d-*, see Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar*, 299–300; A. Wertheimer, “The Functions of the Syriac Particle *d-*,” *Le Muséon* 114 (2001): 259–289; eadem, “A Complex Syriac Sentence Pattern: Object + Object Clause,” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 385–408.

⁵³ For examples of caesuras in Narsai, see *Mēmra* 1 (ed. Mingana 1.17.2–3); *Mēmra* 37 (ed. Mingana 1.336.6–7); *Mēmra* 76 (ed. Frishman 12.295). For the same in Jacob, see *Mēmra* 149 (ed. Bedjan 5.35.9; 5.38.15, 18); *Mēmra* 153 (ed. Bedjan 5.100.11; 5.106.7); *Mēmra* 154 (ed. Bedjan 5.131.12). Neither list should be understood as comprehensive.

It is sufficient that he chose him [so that] he might guard himself from falling,
For if he seeks to fall, his Lord will not prevent him.⁵⁴

This excerpt exhibits both the regularity of the construction of metrical feet as well as a deviation for emphasis.

The first five lines in this passage feature regular constructions of metrical lines. Each metrical foot serves a distinct purpose. In the first line, for example, the first foot contains the protasis of a conditional statement: “If (Solomon) had not repented” (*ʿelulā tāḇ*). The second foot features the apodosis – “look!, he would have fallen” (*hā nappil [h]wā*) – which extends to the third foot beginning with a conjunction: “and not risen” (*wlā qāʿēm [h]wā*). We could also analyze lines two, three, and five in this way.

The fourth line forms a special case. The first and third metrical feet are regular. But the first word of the second foot – “the chosen one” (*lḡabyā*) – serves not only as the object of the verb from the first metrical foot – “prevent” (*kālē*) – but also as the subject of a verb in the second metrical foot “falling” (*dneppe*). The focus remains, though, in this foot on “the chosen one” whether as object or subject.

The sixth line in this quotation deviates from the pattern. Here the first metrical foot and the first two syllables of the second foot form the protasis of a conditional clause: “For if he seeks to fall” (*d'enhu bāʿē dneppe*). The final two syllables of the second foot and the third metrical foot form the apodosis of the conditional: “his Lord will not prevent him” (*mārēh lā kālē lēh*). The grammatical boundary between the protasis and the apodosis occurs directly in the middle of this second foot. This single metrical foot unites the earthly realm – Solomon who fell – with the heavenly realm – the Lord. The use of the pronominal suffix “his” in “his Lord” (*mārēh*) punctuates this difference. The caesura lays heavy emphasis on the difference between the actions of the chosen one and his Lord.

Both the regular construction of metrical lines as well as deviations from it enhance the narratives of Narsai's and Jacob's homilies. The parallel structure of the lines of two sequential couplets allows Narsai to highlight the contrast between two characters metrically. A rare occurrence of caesura helps Jacob distinguish the actions of two actors in his homily. Narsai and Jacob share an approach to constructing metrical lines composed of feet that serve individual functions. The poetic device of caesura represents a very rare departure from this structure in both poets. This examination of metrical lines thus again suggests a common tradition of composing homilies in twelve-syllable couplets.

⁵⁴ Jacob, *Mēmra* 161 (ed. Bedjan 5.360.18–361.2).

The Construction of Metrical Couplets: Enjambment

Descriptions of twelve-syllable couplets from the Syriac tradition emphasize the metrical foot and line more than the metrical couplet. Yet the couplet in Narsai's and Jacob's homilies forms a definitive boundary between syntactical units. The predominant pattern features a statement with a subject and verb in the first line, regardless of whether the statement is a main or subordinate clause.⁵⁵ The second line takes a variety of forms, including a continuation of the statement, the object of the verb in the first line, an independent statement, a dependent clause, a prepositional clause, an adverbial clause, and so forth. This section examines deviations from this pattern in order to expose Narsai's and Jacob's productive use of one form of the poetic device of enjambment, that is, the overflow of syntax from one metrical line to another.⁵⁶

Narsai's and Jacob's homilies rarely diverge from the standard construction of couplets that include a statement with both a subject and verb in the first

⁵⁵ My observations on the construction of metrical couplets in Narsai's and Jacob's poetry rely on a definition of a statement consisting of a subject and a verb. The Syriac translation of the Greek grammarian Dionysios Thrax's (ca. 170–ca. 90 BCE) *Art of Grammar* is attributed to Yawsep Huzaya (ca. 500) who was associated with the School of Nisibis. The Syriac translation of Dionysios Thrax, *Art of Grammar*, II (A. Merx, *Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros* [AKM 9.2; Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1889], 50), describes a statement as follows: "There are eight parts of a statement: noun, verb" The corresponding Greek text can be found in J. Lallot, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace, Sciences du langage* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1998), 48. For a commentary on this section, see *ibid.*, 122–125. This work provides early evidence for the understanding of a statement consisting of at least a noun and verb in Syriac circles.

The translation of Aristotle's *Organon*, and especially *On Interpretation*, into Syriac in the early sixth century surely influenced discussions of Syriac grammar from the sixth century onwards. On the reception of this work, see H. Hugonnard-Roche, *La logique d'Aristote du grec au syriaque: Études sur la transmission des textes de l'Organon et leur interprétation philosophique* (TT 9; Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2004), 57–77. Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 10 (19b) (ed. and trans. H. Tredennick, *Aristotle: Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics* [LCL 325; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938], 140, 141), states that "every positive or negative statement will (be composed) of a noun and a verb, whether definite or indefinite."

In line with Aristotle, three Syriac commentators on Aristotle from the sixth and seventh centuries identify a statement as consisting of a subject and a verb: Proba (6th century?) (*Commentary on Aristotle's On Interpretation* [ed. J. G. E. Hoffmann, *De Hermeneuticis apud Syros Aristoteleis* [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1873], 80]), Paul the Persian (mid-6th century) (*On the Logic of Aristotle*, 13 [J. P. N. Land, *Anecdota syriaca* [Leiden: Brill, 1862–1875], 4:11, 10*; Hugonnard-Roche, *La logique d'Aristote*, 243]), and Jacob of Edessa (ca. 640–708). Jacob of Edessa's use of Aristotle's understanding of a statement appears in a letter written by a contemporary explaining his thought. See George, bishop of the Arabs, *Letter to John the Stylite on Difficulties in Jacob of Edessa's Letters* (R. Talmon, "Jacob of Edessa the Grammarian," in R. B. ter Haar Romeny [ed.], *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day* [MPI 18; Leiden: Brill, 2008], 185). The terminology for sentences evidenced in this letter does not always match that known from Jacob of Edessa's own works, on which see *ibid.*, 183. On the relationship of this text to Aristotle, see V. Ryssel, *Georgs des Araberbischofs: Gedichte und Briefe* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1891), 185.

⁵⁶ T. V. F. Brogan and Clive Scott, "Enjambment," in *NPEPP*, 359.

line. I have identified all examples of couplets in which the subject or verb of a statement overflows from the first to second line of a couplet. Thirty-four such couplets appear across the ten homilies of Narsai examined for this study, accounting for around one and a half percent of all couplets ($34/2,426 = 1.40\%$).⁵⁷ Forty-nine such couplets occur in Jacob's twelve homilies, comprising just over two percent of all couplets ($49/2,342 = 2.09\%$). The rare occurrence of such deviations emphasizes that the presence of both a subject and verb within a main or subordinate clause in the first line of a couplet represents the normal construction of metrical couplets. Although all of these couplets diverge, not all of these instances can be classified as enjambment. I will discuss four categories that expose the challenge of discussing this form of enjambment in Narsai's and Jacob's homilies: (1) extraposition, (2) extended prepositional clauses, (3) single-statement enjambment, and (4) multiple-statement enjambment.

The end of Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 29 'On Palm Sunday' features a sequence of five couplets that deviate from the standard pattern of a statement with subject and verb in the first line of a couplet. These couplets diverge in three different ways and thus serve as a convenient starting point for discussing the use of enjambment in Narsai's and Jacob's homilies:

ܡܢܬܐ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ:
 ܐܢܥ ܢܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ
 ܡܢܬܐ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ:
 ܐܢܥ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ
 ܡܢܬܐ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ:
 ܐܢܥ ܢܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ
 ܡܢܬܐ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ:
 ܐܢܥ ܢܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ
 ܡܢܬܐ ܕܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ:
 ܐܢܥ ܢܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܬܡܠܐ ܡܫܬܐ ܕܝܠܕܐ ܕܗܡܫܐ

The one who sucks the worthy blood that the lance pressed out,
 According to the will of our Lord Jesus, will complete his life.
 As for the one who runs the beautiful path of righteousness,
 Error will flee from his voice wherever he preaches.
 The one who has been chosen to serve as a priest in the holy church,
 According to the will of the chief priest, will lead his sheep.
 Let everyone who has been entrusted in this world with riches
 Satisfy from them the one who requires support,
 So that, on that day that the king of heaven comes in his glory,
 He will be made worthy to enter that kingdom which he promised us.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See footnote 9 above on the three lines of poetry in Narsai of Nisibis, *Mēmṛā* 1, which cannot be easily separated into couplets. I have therefore excluded them from my survey of couplets. Thus, this study discusses 4,855 lines but only 2,426 couplets.

⁵⁸ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.393.2–11).

include numerous examples of such couplets (twenty-two in Narsai's and seven in Jacob's).⁶²

(2) The second category of deviation features an extended prepositional clause or phrase in the first line, as seen in the fifth couplet of this excerpt. This category proves more complicated in relation to the question of enjambment. In the fifth couplet of the excerpt from Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 29, the first line features an extended prepositional clause that results in the delay of the subject and verb until the second line:

ܕܥܬܐ ܥܬܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ
ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ

So that, on that day that the king of heaven comes in his glory,
He will be made worthy to enter that kingdom which he promised us.⁶³

The first line begins with the conjunction “so that” (*d-*) and is followed by a prepositional clause that highlights the time in which the actions discussed in the second line will take place: “so that, on that day ...” (*daḥhāw yawmā ...*). Such extended prepositional clauses represent another type of topicalization. The main verb in this couplet – “he will be made worthy” (*neštwe*) – is delayed until the second line. Yet, aside from the conjunction “so that” (*d-*) that introduces the subordinate clause, the second line forms a self-contained statement with subject and verb. It seems unlikely that this couplet represents an instance of enjambment.

Nevertheless, additional examples of couplets that contain extended prepositional clauses in the first line do seem to feature enjambment. A sequence of two couplets in Jacob's *Mēmṛā* 160 ‘On Samson’ provide two examples. Here he compares the trials of Samson and Jesus:

ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ
ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ
ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ
ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ ܕܥܬܐ

Against Samson who came out to the land of the Philistines
The whelp of the lion came out with a threat in order to mock him (Jgs 14:5).
And against our Lord who came to betroth the daughter of the Arameans
Death dared to lead him into its cave and to have authority over him.⁶⁴

⁶² Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 1 (ed. Mingana 1.14.22–23); *Mēmṛā* 18 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.755.19–24; 1.756.7–8; 1.756.11–12); *Mēmṛā* 24 (ed. Mingana 1.200.18–201.8); *Mēmṛā* 27 (ed. Mingana 1.252.9–11); *Mēmṛā* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.393.4–5); *Mēmṛā* 73 (ed. Mingana 2.310.20–24; 2.311.4–5).

Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 147 (ed. Bedjan 5.15.15–16); *Mēmṛā* 148 (ed. Bedjan 5.30.3–4); *Mēmṛā* 152 (ed. Bedjan 5.82.19–20); *Mēmṛā* 154 (ed. Bedjan 5.147.13–14); *Mēmṛā* 155 (ed. Bedjan 5.177.8–9); *Mēmṛā* 160 (ed. Bedjan 5.353.6–7); *Mēmṛā* 161 (ed. Bedjan 5.364.2–3).

⁶³ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.393.10–11).

⁶⁴ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 160 (ed. Bedjan, 5.335.11–14).

on Palm Sunday. A total of seven couplets across Narsai's homilies contain this type of enjambment.⁶⁸

Jacob's homilies include twenty instances of single-statement enjambment.⁶⁹ Two couplets from Jacob's *Mēmṛā* 149 'On Cain and Abel 3' feature very similar formulations to the couplet from Narsai's homily discussed in the preceding paragraph. Jacob uses this formulation to emphasize the gravity of Cain's wrongdoing in Cain's voice:

حليہ دینا دینکے دینا یی، یوکلک تب:
 کا متعب کھنکھتہ یوکلک تب یوکلک کا
 حقیقتا حلیہ، دینکے یوکلک یوکلک کھنکھتہ:
 کا یوکلک تب یوکلک تب یوکلک تب یوکلک تب

The entire course of your large stream – if you should pour [it] on me –
 Would not wash away my filth and cleanse me from the stain.

All the bandages that you have – if you wrapped [them] around my wound –⁷⁰
 Would not heal me, for my pain is stronger than healing.⁷¹

The first line of each of these couplets starts with a nominal phrase, while the second line of each couplet begins with the negation of the corresponding verb. The delay of the participle forms enjambment that lays additional stress on the inability of either the course of a stream or bandages to wash or heal Cain. The placement of the negative particle “not” (*lā*) in the second rather than first line distinguishes these couplets from the excerpt from Narsai's homily examined in the preceding paragraph. But the presence of the subject at the beginning of the first line and the verbal phrase at the beginning of the second emphasizes their similar construction. This use of single-statement enjambment suggests a common tradition of composing twelve-syllable couplets.

(4) A fourth category of deviation, which I will label multiple-statement enjambment, appears only in Jacob's homilies among the twenty-two homilies investigated for this article. Single-statement enjambment occurs when the subject or verb of one statement overflows into the second line of a couplet. In

⁶⁸ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 18 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.745.9–10); *Mēmṛā* 27 (ed. Mingana 1.249.10–13); *Mēmṛā* 29 (ed. Patriarchal Press 1.383.13–14; 1.393.2–3; 1.393.6–9). One problem appears in identifying one of the two couplets in Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 27 (ed. Mingana 1.249.10–13), as an example of simple enjambment. The first line in the couplet contains an extended noun phrase, and the second line begins with a noun that is the subject complement or predicate. Although the verb is not stated in the second line, it can be inferred from the following couplet that has the same structure but includes the verb “is” (*[h]u*) in the second line.

⁶⁹ Jacob of Serugh, *Mēmṛā* 148 (ed. Bedjan 5.20.3–4); *Mēmṛā* 149 (ed. Bedjan 5.33.9–10; 5.35.7–10); *Mēmṛā* 153 (ed. Bedjan 5.102.15–16); *Mēmṛā* 154 (ed. Bedjan 5.144.19–22); *Mēmṛā* 155 (ed. Bedjan 5.156.13–14; 5.164.18–19; 5.177.4–5); *Mēmṛā* 160 (ed. Bedjan 5.338.4–5; 5.338.8–9; 5.346.4–5; 5.347.3–4; 5.348.19–20; 5.350.11–12; 5.351.5–6); *Mēmṛā* 161 (ed. Bedjan 5.357.11–14; 5.363.11–12).

⁷⁰ A caesura appears in the second metrical foot of this line, as noted in footnote 53 above.

⁷¹ Jacob, *Mēmṛā* 149 (ed. Bedjan 5.35.7–10)

multiple-statement enjambment. The first foot of the first line begins with a short statement: “Perhaps you will say ...” (*waḵbar tēmar*). The second statement begins in the second foot of the first line: “that the Lord (did) not ...” (*d’āplā māryā*). The main verb of this second statement appears at the beginning of the second line: “enter” (*‘al*). Jacob utilizes multiple-statement to mark the beginning of a section of this homily that discusses the proper interpretation of Genesis 18:1–15.

After the introductory couplet, Jacob considers various points of view on this exegetical question. The following fourteen couplets all adhere to a regular pattern of couplets in which both the subject and verb of a single statement appear in the first line.⁷⁵ Within this section, he rejects the view that the angels rather than the Lord entered Abraham’s house. He marks the end of this section with a couplet that features multiple-statement enjambment. Here he argues that God truly entered into Abraham’s house through the angels:

يَهْبِطُ كَمَا جَاءَ الْمَلَكُ حَيْثُ يُخْبَرُ:
 نَحْنُ مُكَلِّمًا خَلَّيْنَا بَيْنَهُ دِيْعُنِي

It has become clear that God also – into the house of Abraham –
 Through his angels truly entered, as we have said.⁷⁶

The first and last couplets in this section parallel each other. In the first lines, each of the metrical feet performs a parallel grammatical function. Indeed, the third metrical feet of these lines are identical: “into the house of Abraham” (*lbēt ‘abrāhām*). The second lines both mention “angels” (*malaḵē*) and feature the four-syllable formula “truly entered” (*‘al bašrārā*). Here Jacob’s use of multiple-statement enjambment serves a structural purpose within this homily.

Both Narsai and Jacob use the poetic device of enjambment to enhance their preaching. The examination of the relationship between the first and second lines gave rise to questions of word order that did not surface as strongly for metrical lines and feet. Single- and multiple-statement enjambment represent the most readily identifiable instances of enjambment in couplets in which the subject or verb overflows into the second line. Similarities in Narsai’s and Jacob’s use of single-statement enjambment point again to a common tradition of constructing poetry. Yet multiple-statement enjambment forms one difference, as this construction does not appear in Narsai’s homilies. This investigation of enjambment thus suggests how an analysis of the construction of their metrical poetry may also reveal the individual characteristics of each author.

⁷⁵ Jacob, *Mēmra* 153 (ed. Bedjan 5.101.11–102.16).

⁷⁶ Jacob, *Mēmra* 153 (ed. Bedjan 5.102.17–18).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be helpful to identify areas for future research that this article has not engaged directly. The focus in this study on the metrical units of feet, lines, and couplets derives from descriptions of the meter in the Syriac tradition itself. Yet other patterns appear in Narsai's and Jacob's homilies. An examination of construct chains that stretch across multiple feet or of the ways that each author marks sections within their homilies would lead to a better understanding of their respective styles. Further, this study has not addressed word order in Syriac.⁷⁷ Devices such as extraposition and diverse forms of topicalization recur throughout Syriac prose and poetry.⁷⁸ A comparative examination of prose and poetic works of individual authors would clarify tendencies within different types of writing.

Despite these limitations, the present study has not only led to a better understanding of Narsai's and Jacob's works but also offered insight into the development of the Syriac poetic tradition. First, and at a very basic level, it allows us to glimpse how Syriac poets transformed their language to exploit the possibilities of meter for enhancing their preaching. Anaphoras at the beginning of individual lines provided a structure into which they could easily insert verbs or nouns to fill out a four-syllable foot. Their seldom use of caesuras emphasizes the regular construction of metrical lines in which each metrical foot serves a distinct purpose. The relatively rare appearance of enjambment in metrical couplets exposes the regular pattern of expressing both the subject and verb within the first line of a couplet. This offers a more specific understanding of the process of constructing twelve-syllable couplets.

Second, Narsai and Jacob use poetic devices to organize sections of their homilies. Anaphoras draw attention to sections of their homilies. One example even features a slight switch in interjection to emphasize the contrast between the characters in a narrative. Their use of enjambment likewise reveals how they accentuated sections of their homilies through poetic devices. A sequence of five irregular couplets including three instances of single-statement enjambment forms a climax to one of Narsai's homilies. Jacob demarcated a section of a homily through enjambment in which he progressed from one interpretation of a passage to another.

⁷⁷ The topic of word order does not receive extensive attention in either of the standard grammars. For their general discussions of word order, see Nöldeke, *Compendious Syriac Grammar*, 258–262; R. Duval, *Traité de grammaire syriaque* (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1881), 363–368. See the more recent studies in G. Goldenberg, *Studies in Semitic Linguistics: Selected Writings* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998), 525–604.

⁷⁸ Indeed, the examples of extraposition in Khan, *Studies in Semitic Syntax*, 123–146, come primarily from prose works.

Third, Narsai's and Jacob's construction of twelve-syllable couplets features both similarities and differences. At the present moment, Narsai's and Jacob's homilies form the earliest datable examples of the meter of twelve-syllable couplets. Their similar construction of poetry and use of poetic devices suggests somewhat surprisingly a well-developed tradition. The small differences that I have identified between them lead to more precision in describing how these two homilists differed in their use of a common meter.

This article as a whole has sought to demonstrate the value of a poetic investigation of Narsai's and Jacob's homilies. Such analyses aid the interpretation of their works by bringing to light their use of meter to enhance their homilies. But perhaps more importantly, a comparative analysis of authors such as Narsai and Jacob offers a glimpse into the development of the Syriac poetic tradition. We will likely never have a clear picture of the historical relationship between Narsai, Jacob, and other Syriac authors in Late Antiquity. We will also likely never know precisely how they learned and transmitted the skills necessary to compose such poetry. Yet poetically attentive studies of their writings will aid us in exposing the emergence of the Syriac poetic tradition that may otherwise remain invisible.

An Early Syriac *Apologia Crucis*

Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'

Kelli Bryant Gibson

Since Alphonse Mingana's 1905 publication of many of Narsai's *mēmṛē*, these homilies have justly attracted the scrutiny of scholars.¹ However, *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross'* has garnered negligible interest. There is not yet a published modern translation of the *mēmṛā*,² and Luise Abramowski's 2004 article on the *mēmṛā*'s christological titles is the only scholarly treatment of it.³ Nevertheless, this *mēmṛā* rewards careful attention. It is one of the earliest Syriac homilies for the annual Feast of the Discovery of the Cross (Feast of the Cross), and so it is a significant witness to the development of the East Syrian liturgical year.⁴ Abramowski considered this *mēmṛā* primarily in terms of the fifth-century Trisagion controversy, but attention to the piece as a whole points decisively, or so I will argue, to another conflict altogether: a dispute over the veneration of the cross. Narsai's homily is thus an early witness to an apologetic theme that only became prominent more than a century after his death. Narsai's focus on defending the veneration of the cross problematizes earlier attempts at establishing a likely date for this *mēmṛā* based on the homily's christology, but it also yields more nuanced considerations for the dating of the *mēmṛā*. Most importantly, the homily offers unexpected insight into social pressures and theological concerns in the Church of the East apart from the continuing strife of christological controversy.

¹ A. Mingana, *Narsai Doctoris Syri Homiliae et Carmina* (Mosul: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1905).

² An English translation by the present author will be published under the auspices of the project directed by the editors of this volume.

³ L. Abramowski, "Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: 'Unser König Jesus', der 'gekreuzigte Mann'," in P. Gemeinhardt and U. Kühneweg (eds.), *Patristica et Oecumenica: Festschrift für Wolfgang A. Beinert zum 65. Geburtstag* (Marburg: Elwert, 2004), 157–166.

⁴ Whereas most traditions celebrate the Feast of the Cross on 14 September, the Church of the East celebrates it on 13 September.

The Occasion of Composition

One might reasonably wonder whether the scribal title, “On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross,” truly reflects the purpose for which this *mēmra* was originally written. The oldest manuscript witness for the homily dates to the nineteenth century, and it is difficult to tell how old the scribal title is or whether it reflects authorial intent. To this end, it is helpful to trace the development of the Feast of the Cross among Syriac-speaking Christians. The Feast of the Cross had become a permanent and popular fixture in Jerusalem’s liturgical calendar by the time of Egeria’s visit *circa* 381–384. Egeria reported that it was celebrated at the same time as the Encaenia of the Holy Sepulchre because the cross was found at the time of the church’s construction, though she did not reveal how the cross was found or by whom.⁵ While there are earlier references to fragments of the True Cross,⁶ Egeria’s *Itinerary* is the earliest source to connect the alleged discovery of the cross with the liturgical celebration. Composed in 395, Ambrose’s *De obitu Theodosii* is the first documented attribution of the discovery to Constantine I’s mother, Helena.⁷ The rapid spread of wooden fragments purporting to be pieces of the True Cross along with an evolving legend of its discovery by a popular royal saint likely contributed to the Feast of the Cross spreading in farflung places, while the Encaenia remained primarily a local Jerusalem feast.⁸

⁵ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, 48–49 (ed. A. Franceschini and R. Weber, *Itineraria et alia geographica*, vol. 1 [CCSL 175; Turnhout: Brepols, 1965]; trans. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels* [3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxbow Press, 2006]).

⁶ The earliest is Cyril of Jerusalem, who mentions the relic several times ca. 348–351. See *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.10, 10.19, and 13.4; see also *Letter to Constantius*, 3. The standard Greek edition for the Catechetical Lectures is still W. H. Reischl and J. Rupp, *S. Patris nostri Cyrilli Hierosolymorum Archiepiscopi Opera quae supersunt Omnia* (Munich: Sumptibus Librariae Lentnerianae, 1848–1860). For English translation, see L. P. McCauley and A. A. Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1970). For the Greek edition of the *Letter to Constantius*, see E. Bihain, “Épître de Cyrille de Jérusalem à Constance sur la vision de la Croix (BHG 413),” *Byzantion* 43 (1973): 264–296; a recent English translation is in E. Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London: Routledge, 2000), 68–70.

⁷ Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* (ed. O. Faller, *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, Part 7 [CSEL 73; Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1955], 369–401; trans. J. H. V. G. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005]).

⁸ For two contrasting approaches to the development of the legend, see J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) and S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991). An example of how the legend spread alongside distribution of the relics may be found in Paulinus of Nola’s *Letter 31* to Sulpicius Severus (ed. with German trans. M. Skeb, *Epistolae = Briefe* [Freiburg: Herder, 1998]; trans. P. G. Walsh, *Letters of St Paulinus of Nola: Letters 23–51* [London: Longmans, Green, 1967]).

The widespread practice of recounting the Helena legend in homilies for the feast day suggests, but does not demonstrate, that the legend was a catalyst for the geographical spread of the feast day.

One can only hazard a guess as to when Syriac churches began to adopt the Feast of the Cross. Ephrem's writings, of course, evince no awareness of the feast,⁹ although a caché of natural and biblical types of the cross similar to those found in Ephrem's corpus appear in later Syriac homilies for the feast day. The *Doctrina Addai*, written in the first third of the fifth century,¹⁰ is the earliest Syriac text to show awareness of the legend of Helena's discovery of the cross. Protonike's "first discovery of the cross" is clearly modelled on the Helena legend.¹¹ Next, the tradition attributes *mēmṛē* for the Feast of the Cross to East Syrian Narsai (d. ca. 500) and West Syrian Jacob of Serugh (d. ca. 521). If the Helena legend was indeed a catalyst for the popularization of the Feast of the Cross, Syriac-speaking churches likely began to celebrate the feast day relatively soon after their reception of the legend. It is thus not chronologically improbable that Jacob or Narsai wrote their homilies for this feast day. Furthermore, if both communities were celebrating the feast by this time, it is reasonable to suppose that Syriac-speaking Christians began to celebrate the feast sometime during the first third of the fifth century and prior to the Council of Ephesus in 431. This was the very time when the Feast of the Cross was growing in popularity elsewhere.

One may also compare Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 54 with other, admittedly later, Syriac texts for the Feast of the Cross to determine if they have thematic similarities.¹² There are, in fact, remarkable resonances. Here I will only highlight the common themes that Narsai shares with these texts, but more detailed discussion will follow below. Nearly every extant Syriac *mēmṛā* mentions Constantine's vision and/or Helena's discovery of the cross.¹³ Notably, two Syriac liturgical poems in

⁹ Ephrem's death preceded Egeria's testimony about the Feast of the Cross in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ S. H. Griffith, "The *Doctrina Addai* as a Paradigm of Christian Thought in Fifth-Century Edessa," *Hugoye* 6 (2003): 291.

¹¹ S. Heid, "Zur frühen Protonike- und Kyriakoslegende," *AB* 109 (1991): 84.

¹² For an indepth study of these materials, see K. Bryant, *Festal Apologetics: Syriac Treatises for the Feast of the Discovery of the Cross* (D.Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, 2015), especially chapters 3, 6, and 7. The thematic similarities are shared across denominational boundaries, and here I draw from both East and West Syrian texts: Narsai's *Mēmṛā* 54, Jacob of Serugh's *Mēmṛā* 'On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Cross', David Eskolaya's *Mēmṛā* 'On the Discovery of the Cross' (date unknown), a treatise by John of Dara (d. ca. 860), two works by Moshe bar Kepha (d. 903), and a treatise by Dionysius bar Šalibi (d. 1171). The supplement to the dissertation contains a diplomatic Syriac edition and English translation of the works by John of Dara, Moshe bar Kepha, and Dionysius bar Šalibi.

¹³ Most of the *mēmṛē* discuss the invention legend briefly, but Jacob of Serugh's homily is entirely devoted to the narrative. It is preserved in several manuscripts, for which, see A. Vööbus, *Handschriftliche Überlieferung der Mēmṛē-Dichtung des Ja'qōb von Serūg* (CSCO 344; Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973), 2.218. See also a helpful critique of Vööbus in M. Kohlbacher, "Die Taufe Kaiser Konstantins und ihr geheimer Held. Anmerkungen zu einem des Jakob von Batnan in Sarug (BHO 1070. 1072 [syr.]/1071 [arab.])," in M. Tamcke (ed.), *Syriaca: Zur Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie, und Gegenwartsfrage der syrischen Kirchen. 2. Deutsches Syrologen-Symposium (Juli 2000, Wittenberg)* (Münster: Lit, 2002), 72–75. Thanks to the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, I was able to consult a digitized version of ms. Mardin, Church of the Forty Martyrs 130, ff. 203r–205v.

the East Syrian *Ḥudrā* recount the discovery of the relic.¹⁴ Like the invention legend, particularly the Judah Kyriakos version, which is rife with anti-Jewish themes,¹⁵ Syriac *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross frequently contain polemic against religious rivals, whether they be other Christians, pagans, Jews, or, later, Muslims. It is also common to list types of the cross from nature and scripture.¹⁶ Several treatises cite or explicate 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, as Narsai does at length. The *Ḥudrā* likewise designates 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 as a reading for the Feast of the Cross.¹⁷ Finally, Narsai's defense of the veneration of the cross also anticipates themes in *mēm̄rē* written after the Arab conquests.¹⁸ One might try to argue that the combination of these themes led a later scribe to assume erroneously that Narsai wrote the *mēm̄rā* for the Feast of the Cross. However, it is simpler to conclude that Narsai's *mēm̄rā* was actually written for this feast day, and it is thus the earliest representative of the East Syrian homiletical tradition for the Feast of the Cross.

Dating

The text offers only the vaguest suggestions about its provenance and date. In the most forthcoming passage, Narsai contrasts the rapid, counterintuitive spread of Christianity with older, rival religions' alleged failure to spread widely.

Look and be amazed at all the teachings on earth –
how the crucified man perfected and brought them to an end.
By the rays of his saving symbol religions fell,
and evil spirits fled and were put to shame, and their ministers ceased.
Chaldeanism held sway for 4,000 years,
but it was unable to subject everything to its teaching.
Although the sore had spread in the world in its antiquity,
the cross at its manifestation uprooted it, cast it down, and exposed its deceit.
In the same way the Law of Moses, the firstborn of prophecy,
also held sway for 1,500 years.

¹⁴ S. P. Brock, "Two Syriac Poems on the Invention of the Cross," in N. el-Khoury, H. Crouzel, and R. Reinhardt (ed.), *Lebendige Überlieferung: Prozesse der Annäherung und Auslegung. Festschrift für Hermann-Josef Vogt zum 60. Geburtstag* (Beirut: Friedrich-Rückert-Verlag, 1992), 55–82.

¹⁵ See H. J. W. Drijvers and J. W. Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross: The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac* (CSCO 565; Leuven: Peeters, 1997).

¹⁶ Moshe bar Kepha's and John of Dara's *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross both contain *florilegia* for the types of the cross that are uncannily similar in content to Narsai's *catena*. See Bryant, *Festal Apologetics*, 259, for a chart comparing types of the cross in Syriac *mēm̄rē* for the Feast of the Cross.

¹⁷ P. Kannookadan, *The East Syrian Lectionary: An Historico-Liturgical Study* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yagam, 1991), 58.

¹⁸ For example, John of Dara's entire *mēm̄rā* is devoted to the subject. See fn. 12 above.

Although the prophets, priests, and kings were its preachers,
 not one of the nations converted and came to its teaching.
 Behold, [it is] also 1,000 years since Magianism began,
 and its festering sore spread among many.
 For it was not sufficient, even though kings arose in aid of it
 with the judgments [by] which they upheld it in the wrath of their threats.
 With dreadful torments and harsh deaths they killed [people] of all ranks,
 but they were unable to convert a single person to their teaching.
 Although they were rash and attacked the Mother of Jesus,
 an innumerable [multitude] turned from what was theirs and believed in Jesus.
 By means of the church they tasted the living spring of baptism,
 and they became advocates on behalf of the confession of our faith.
 The torments of savage, bloodthirsty men were powerless,
 and the children of the holy church multiplied innumerablely.
 The error of all Magianism thus held sway
 among rulers and harsh kings who sprang up by it.
 Now, in more or less five hundred years, the crucified One¹⁹
 drew all peoples near to his teaching.²⁰

Narsai's numbers here are much too approximate to help establish a firm date, but his comments about Chaldean astrology and Magianism do fit a Persian context well.²¹ Noteworthy too are Narsai's pathos-filled words about Magian persecution of Christians. Whereas Chaldeanism and Judaism receive only two couplets apiece, Narsai describes at length the institutional support for Magianism, state-sponsored persecution of Christians, and the alleged growth of the church despite harsh opposition. Although Persian persecution may not have been of the precise character that East Syrian hagiography would have us believe,²² the experience of persecution and perception of social marginalization nevertheless did shape the self-understanding of the Church of the East. The likelihood of a Persian context suggests a *terminus post quem* after Narsai's departure from Edessa, perhaps circa 471. Beyond this, a more precise date based on the content of the *mēmṛā* is elusive.

Abramowski attempted to narrow the date of authorship through the study of the christological titles used in the *mēmṛā*. The most frequent titles for Christ in this *mēmṛā* all emphasize Christ's manner of death: "the crucified King (*malkā šlibā*)," "the crucified Man (*gabrā šlibā*)," and simply "the crucified One (*šlibā*)." Although Narsai prefers to use the passive participle of the verb *šlb*, that is, *šlibā*, for these titles, he sometimes uses the synonym *zqīpā* with no discernible dif-

¹⁹ Or "the cross."

²⁰ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.119.17–120.11).

²¹ Abramowski, "Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: 'Unser König Jesus', der 'gekreuzigte Mann'," 157–158.

²² As R.E. Payne argues in his recent study, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 23–58.

ference in connotation. Understandably, the titles “crucified King” and “crucified Man” reminded Abramowski of the Trisagion controversy, which was stirred up by the Miaphysite bishop of Antioch, Peter the Fuller, who reigned intermittently between 470–488. To the traditional Trisagion prayer, “Holy God, holy Mighty, holy Immortal, have mercy on us,” Peter had inserted the phrase, “Christ the King, who was crucified for us” before the ending petition. Abramowski found Narsai’s christological title “crucified King” evocative of passages from Philoxenus’ *Letter to the Monks of Tell ‘Adā*, which likewise discusses the Trisagion controversy.²³ In the letter, Philoxenus denounces as “Nestorian” the Chalcedonian bishop, Calendio, who reigned in Antioch while Peter the Fuller was in exile between 482–484. Thus, Abramowski concluded that Narsai purposefully used the title “crucified King” in response to the Trisagion controversy, and she suggested a date of composition between 482–484 or shortly thereafter.²⁴

What Abramowski’s article lacks, however, is thorough consideration of these titles in the context of the *mēmṛā*. What are the key themes of the *mēmṛā*, and do these seem to fit the context of the Trisagion controversy? How do Narsai’s christological titles function in their immediate context? If the preference for certain christological titles might be better explained by other considerations, do Abramowski’s conclusions about the date for this *mēmṛā* still hold? The rest of this article will unpack the broad contours of Narsai’s *mēmṛā*, after which I will return to these questions and reassess Abramowski’s argument.

Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’

Mēmṛā 54 contains 295 couplets arranged in three main sections: 1. a theological exposition on the cross and crucifixion in the divine economy (ln. 1–123); 2. a *catena* of types of the cross found in nature and scripture (ln. 124–212); 3. an apologetic section that defends the veneration of the cross against accusations of idolatry and ends with a closing exhortation (ln. 213–295). As a whole, these three parts work together to justify the veneration of crosses. I will address each section in turn, showing how they contribute to the overall argument.

The Theological Exposition: An Apologia Crucis

The first and longest of the three sections of the *mēmṛā* is a theological exposition on the significance of the cross and crucifixion for the divine economy. 1 Corin-

²³ For the Syriac text of the letter with Italian translation, see I. Guidi, “Le lettera di Filosseno ai monaci di Tell ‘Addā,” *Atti della Reale Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Serie Terza: Memorie della Classe di Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 12 (1884): 449–501.

²⁴ For the full argument, see Abramowski, “Narsai (ca. 415?–502), Hom. LIV (30) Mingana II 114–130: ‘Unser König Jesus’, der ‘gekreuzigte Mann,’” 163–166.

thians 1:18–25 is foundational to this section, and it influences Narsai's polemic in the final section. Because this passage inspires the overarching theme of the entire *mēmṛā*, it is worth quoting in full:

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.²⁵

The echoes of this passage in the beginning of the *mēmṛā* are strong. In lines 12–13, Narsai paraphrases 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For this reason by the wisdom of the God of all, / all the world did not perceive the power of his wisdom. | By the contemptibility of the Gospel the Creator wished / to save and to redeem humanity by means of the crucified Man."²⁶ Despite overwhelming natural evidence that should have led human beings to contemplate their Creator,²⁷ they failed to perceive God due to their "hardness of heart."²⁸

Narsai interprets 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 as a prophetic word about the global success of the gospel over against rival ideologies. In his view, Greek philosophers thought that their teachings illuminated the world, but the cross shone forth and obscured the light of the philosophers, and all the world "ran and cleaved to" the crucified Man.²⁹ Narsai concludes, "Therefore, the word of Paul, the herald of the Spirit, was fulfilled, / so that the wisdom of the Greeks failed and perished."³⁰ Whereas the downfall of the Greeks was made evident by the nations being gathered to the crucified Man, Narsai asserts that the inverse is true of the Jews. Just as the cross purportedly "obscured" the light of Greek philosophy, it likewise "abolished the laws and the teachers of the Jews."³¹ Narsai imagines a Jewish interlocutor demanding signs like Moses',³² and he retorts that the signs of Moses did very little good. The signs themselves did not convince a single Egyptian to worship the Creator, and even Moses' own people failed to keep the Law and

²⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

²⁶ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.115.1–3).

²⁷ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.115.3–20).

²⁸ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.115.21).

²⁹ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.116.4–8).

³⁰ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.116.9–10).

³¹ *Mēmṛā 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross'* (ed. Mingana 2.116.12).

³² 1 Cor 1:22; cf. John 6:30–32.

worshipped “cast metal images.”³³ Unlike the Gentile peoples, whom the cross gathered to the crucified One, the Jews were dispersed to the ends of the earth.³⁴

Although Narsai’s explicit focus on the passage in 1 Corinthians 1 is concentrated in the first 48 lines of the *mēmṛā*, the passage continues to influence the whole, particularly as Narsai addresses religious rivals, whether Jews or pagans. In line 54, Narsai invites his audience to examine the “mighty acts” of the cross.³⁵ Having just admonished the Jews for past episodes of idolatry, Narsai now polemicizes against pagan cults in a similar manner. 1 Corinthians 1:21 states that the world failed to recognize the Creator through wisdom, but the passage gives no further detail of this poor exercise of wisdom. Narsai uses Romans 1:18–32 to fill in the gaps. In Romans 1:19–20, Paul argues concerning the Gentiles, “For what can be known about God is plain to (humanity), because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”³⁶ However, human beings failed to recognize what ought to have been plain to them, and they worshipped created things instead of the Creator. Paraphrasing Paul, Narsai explains that humankind “exchanged the glory (of the Creator) for the work of (the Creator’s) hands.”³⁷

When Narsai details the depths of human depravity, his description is transparently inspired by Romans 1:18–32. According to Narsai, unsatisfied with mere idolatry, people sacrificed their own children and indulged all manner of sexual lusts. Their homes and cities overflowed with countless gods and goddesses, social disputes and divisions multiplied, and wars abounded.³⁸ Narsai observes that the praise of God had ceased because everyone’s tongues were “wearied by vain (words), / by the praise of evil spirits and the adulation of unclean demons.”³⁹ By the end of his catalogue of human vices, Narsai is speechless himself: “Unutterable is the sin that the world committed previously, / and inexplicable is the wickedness that it worked in all ages. | Speech is (too) feeble to speak of the kinds of iniquity / that all humanity committed before the advent of the crucified King.”⁴⁰

³³ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.116.13–22).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.116.13, 25).

³⁵ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.117.8–9).

³⁶ The same passages from 1 Corinthians 1 and Romans 1 inspire Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*, another text which has been described as an *apologia crucis*. The hermeneutical approaches of Athanasius and Narsai differ too much to indicate direct influence, but it is notable that there appears to be a shared tradition of interpretation. For an introduction to the Syriac reception of Athanasius, see R. B. ter Haar Romeny, “Athanasius in Syriac,” *CHRC* 90 (2010): 225–256.

³⁷ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.117.11–12). Narsai paraphrases Romans 1:23.

³⁸ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.117.10–118.15).

³⁹ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.117.17–18).

⁴⁰ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.118.15–18).

Nevertheless, this dismal state of affairs does not get the last word. According to Narsai, when the crucified Man appeared from within the People,⁴¹ he abolished idolatry and its wicked trappings, and he caused all the peoples to return to the one God. At the close of this first section, the victory Christ achieved through the cross stands in stark contrast to Narsai's preceding polemic on the alleged inefficacy of other religions and the wickedness of idolatry. Those whose tongues were previously wearied by the praise of demons now join in an unanimous, multilingual doxology:

Praise be to the crucified One, who killed death by his crucifixion
and proclaimed peace to all (people), distant and near.
He is our peace who made the two with one consent,
and he destroyed the hedge that stood before humanity.⁴²

...

Praise be to the crucified One, by whose manifestation mortals are saved
and by whom spiritual things and physical things find peace.
Praise be to the crucified One, who changed and destroyed all blasphemies
and uprooted false worship from within the People and the Gentile peoples.
Praise be to the crucified One, who made the (whole) human race equal,
so that from within the earth they will be heirs in the kingdom on high.
It is the crucified One who purified creation from stink
and wiped the hateful smell of foul deeds from it.
It is the crucified One by whom the human race is gathered
into a single church, the peaceful haven of the one God.⁴³

This utterance of praise to the "crucified One" is particularly striking. Here Narsai simply uses the word *šlibā*, and several of the lines could reasonably be translated with either "the crucified One" or "the cross." Narsai's ambiguous use of the word *šlibā* causes the reader to wonder which meaning he intends. In a *mēmra* devoted to the defense of the veneration of the cross, this easy confusion may well be purposeful. When Narsai directs his attention explicitly to the veneration of the cross, this close connection between the crucified One and his cross undergirds his explanation: "The wood of the cross, although it is humble in its nature / ... is highly honored because of Jesus."⁴⁴ What the crucified Man effects for human salvation is done only through his cross, so what can be said about one can be said about the other. People adore the cross because it bears the "great image of the King Jesus."⁴⁵ The proliferation of the adjective *šlibā* and the noun *šlibā* in this homily certainly seems to identify the cross with the cru-

⁴¹ As is common in Syriac texts, Narsai refers to the Jews as "the People," and the Gentiles as "the peoples."

⁴² Eph 2:13–15.

⁴³ *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.118.22–119.9).

⁴⁴ *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.127.12–13).

⁴⁵ *Mēmra* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.127.15–19).

cified One, thus justifying its veneration. Overt polemic against the Miaphysite Trisagion is absent.

Types of the Cross

So far Narsai has used a fairly traditional approach to construct an *apologia crucis*, and he has gradually extended his theology of the crucifixion to defend the cross itself. The second section of Narsai's homily is entirely devoted to types of the cross found in nature and scripture. Many of these types are scattered throughout Ephrem's corpus and found in other early Christian texts. Narsai's innovation is to gather them in one place and to organize them sequentially. I will make general observations about Narsai's *catena* rather than discussing each type in detail.

Narsai's types from nature are comparatively short, covering a total of 19 lines. Perhaps Narsai abbreviates his types from nature because he has already asserted that humanity failed to seek God through natural wisdom. Any natural objects with a cross-like shape or comprised of four parts meet the criteria for inclusion in Narsai's list. For example, Narsai invokes the cross-like shape of a bird in flight, an image already familiar from Ephrem.⁴⁶ While Narsai passes over most of these natural types in quick succession with little elaboration, the type of the cardinal directions is particularly evocative because of how Narsai uses the same imagery in the preceding section of the *mēmṛā*. Before criticizing Chaldeanism, Judaism, and Magianism for their inability to spread widely despite their greater antiquity, he beckons the hearer to consider the incredible spread of Christianity among many peoples in a short amount of time:

If you wish to learn the power of the crucified man,
in your mind look whence his gospel message extends:
Namely, see in the east how he has emitted the power of his rays,
and Persia, which is darkened by idolatry, has been illuminated.
Let the mind of your soul be raised to the west,
and see there his powerful greatness through his worshippers.
He has caught all the kings and warriors in his net,
and he set them firmly upon the foundation of his doctrine.
In your thoughts look at the south and observe in it
what the cross by its manifestation⁴⁷ has accomplished for its inhabitants.
Ascend in your understanding also to the whole region of the north,
and see the power of his name, the victory of the man hung (on the cross).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See especially the natural types of the cross in *Hymns on Faith* 18 (ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Fide* [CSCO 154–155; Leuven: Peeters, 1955]). See also P. Yousif, "St. Ephrem on the Symbols in Nature: Faith, the Trinity, and the Cross (Hymns on Faith, No. 18)," *ECR* 10 (1978): 52–60.

⁴⁷ Or, "the crucified one by his manifestation."

⁴⁸ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.119.9–17). Narsai uses *gabrā zqīpā* synonymously with *gabrā šlībā* at the end of this passage.

Narsai's *catena* reminds the audience of the earlier image. In a practice of communal imagination, they have visualized the sign of the cross spanning the known world, tracing it together in their minds.

Narsai's types of the cross from the Old Testament are far more developed than his types from nature. These types break fairly evenly into three sections ordered canonically: types from the lives of the patriarchs, types from the life of Moses, and types from the life of Elisha. Narsai has thus carefully organized these types of the cross so that they form a chain across the story of scripture. The criteria for selection varies. Narsai invokes several types that foreshadow aspects of the divine economy. An obvious example is the binding of Isaac, which in Narsai's view anticipates Christ's sacrifice. Some types are performative actions, like Moses' outstretched arms at the battle of Amalek. Still others are material objects that proved to be efficacious agents of salvation, such as the bronze serpent on the pole.⁴⁹

Most importantly, the *catena* is not a haphazard or random diversion from the subject at hand, but rather these types collectively contribute to the larger themes of the *mēmṛā*. The types that illustrate different aspects of the divine economy reinforce the arguments in the preceding *apologia crucis*. The types of efficacious objects provide precursors to the veneration of the cross, a practice which Narsai will defend at length in the final section of the *mēmṛā*. Even the performative actions may be used in a polemical way. For Narsai, when Abraham walked the length and breadth of the Promised Land, he inscribed the land itself with the sign of the cross in order to indicate by what sign a person will enter the kingdom above. Narsai addresses the Jews directly with this particular type: "O Jews, see how the leader of your nation engraved / the great type of the sign of the cross on the land that he inherited."⁵⁰ The polemical intention of Narsai's list of types from nature and scripture becomes even more apparent at the close of this section of the *mēmṛā*: "Whoever is headstrong and contends against these symbols, / he knows that his contention is not against us, | (but) against his Lord who traced out his symbols in every generation."⁵¹ For Narsai, to reject the types of the cross in nature and in scripture is to attack the Lord himself. Here one sees again the close connection between the cross and the crucified One, but there is still no hint of the Trisagion controversy.

⁴⁹ Numbers 21:4–9. It is perhaps worth noting that in six of the eight manuscript witnesses for *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Feast of the Discovery of the Holy Cross', a *mēmṛā* entitled 'On the Bronze Serpent' (*Mēmṛā* 55) follows. See the codicological information in W. F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 39 (1973): 275–306.

⁵⁰ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.122.17–18).

⁵¹ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.126.5–7).

Defending the Veneration of the Cross

The third and final section of the *mēmrā* directly addresses the concern that has motivated Narsai all along. Narsai again alludes to 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 at the beginning of this section: “So then let us speak against the pagans and the Jews / who in their stubbornness scoff together at our gospel message.”⁵² The scoffing targets the veneration of the cross: “The erring suppose that the holy church worships the wood / ... and honors it as a god instead of God. | Because they worshipped created things instead of the Creator, / they arise with false accusation and revile us for the wood of the cross.”⁵³ After his previous invective against the idolatry of pagans and Jews, Narsai must explain how the veneration of the cross differs from idolatry:

The church does not worship the visible material
but the sign of the crucified King who conquered by the wood.
But if the church worshipped the wood, as they suppose,
why does it also make the cross from other sorts (of materials)?
From all sorts of things – small, large, and valuable –
the church makes the revealed image (*ṣalmā*) of the hidden King.

...

The church is not misled by trees or images
nor by material things or objects that exist because of human beings.
When it worships the saving sign that is depicted,
it worships the Lord and not corruptible materials.⁵⁴

Narsai anticipates two apologetic arguments that became prominent in Byzantine defenses of the veneration of the cross during the second quarter of the seventh century.⁵⁵ Later Christian apologists also argued that the variety of materials used to fashion crosses indicates that the material itself is not worshipped. Some observe that if Christians did worship the material, rather than the cross, they would worship that material no matter where they found it and in whatever shape. As this is not the case, surely Christians do not worship the material. The claim that to worship the sign of the cross is to worship the Lord is ubiquitous in the later treatises that discuss the topic. Narsai’s homily is an important early witness to the development of these apologetic arguments.

Next, Narsai presents the veneration of the cross as analogous to the respect shown to objects because of whom they represent. Coins, for example, bear the image of an earthly king, and “the covetous grasp (them) as if to take hold of the

⁵² *Mēmrā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.7–9).

⁵³ *Mēmrā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.9–12).

⁵⁴ *Mēmrā* 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’ (ed. Mingana 2.126.13–21).

⁵⁵ A valuable introduction to the anti-Jewish literature of the period is V. Déroche and G. Dagron, “Juifs et chrétiens dans l’orient du VII^e siècle,” *Travaux et mémoires* 11 (1991): 17–273.

king” himself.⁵⁶ Even more apt is the example of a royal seal (*ṭabʿā*).⁵⁷ Even if it is stamped on contemptible dirt, those who receive a letter from the king stamped with his seal honor it as though it were the king himself.⁵⁸ Christians treat the scriptures and the cross in the same way: “So then how much more is this true for the seal (*ṭabʿā*) of Jesus Christ our King, / who sealed (*ḥattem*) his words with the great seal (*ṭabʿā*) of his crucifixion? | ... If the seals of temporal kings are honored on the earth, / how much more then should we honor the seal of the cross of the King on high?”⁵⁹

After offering more palatable analogies for the veneration of the cross, Narsai presents positive reasons for revering the cross. Narsai begins with the prevalence of the sign of the cross in the life of the church. Blameworthy people are made holy and perfected when they are marked with the cross in baptism. The sign of the cross sets priests apart in the rite of ordination. The priest seals every church building with the sign of the cross. By the sign of the cross, all of the sacraments of the church are consecrated.⁶⁰ Narsai then declares the wonders that the cross performs beyond the walls of the church. At the sign of the cross, demons “flee from its dazzling rays and hide like bats.”⁶¹ Diseases and pains are healed. The martyrs owe their victory to the power of the cross, with which they run the evil one through as though with a spear.⁶² Making the sign of the cross is an ancient, uncontroversial gesture, and the cross had long been heralded as a means of triumph over disease, sin, Satan, and death. Narsai evokes cherished practices and convictions in order to advocate the apparently more controversial practice of venerating crosses. Finally, Narsai recalls Constantine’s vision of a cross of light in the sky and Helena’s discovery of the True Cross which had been buried.⁶³ “From that day when the holy wood was covered, / humanity journeyed as though in darkness until it dawned. | And now it has dawned. His light has become radiant to the ends of the earth, / and it gladdens heavenly and earthly things with its beauty.”⁶⁴ Perhaps Narsai hopes that Constantine’s heavenly vision and his mother’s alleged discovery of the True Cross, narratives that were regularly recounted during the Feast of the Cross, will reassure the audience that a relatively new feast and liturgical practice are fully in line with East Syrian orthodoxy. Narsai ends his *mēmṛā* with a final exhortation to embrace the veneration of the cross: “Behold! Multitudes upon multitudes of watchers and people worship / and honor (the cross) with hymns and glorify it. | Come, let us

⁵⁶ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.127.15–16).

⁵⁷ The same word is commonly used as a synonym for the sign of the cross.

⁵⁸ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.127.20–128.4).

⁵⁹ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.128.2–7).

⁶⁰ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.128.11–22).

⁶¹ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.128.23–25).

⁶² *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.129.1–2).

⁶³ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.129.14–25).

⁶⁴ *Mēmṛā 54 ‘On the Finding of the Holy Cross’* (ed. Mingana 2.129.25–130.3).

confess it (in) one confession with the spiritual beings. / Glory be to him who exalted our race by his cross!"⁶⁵

Conclusion

After a careful analysis of the main themes of the *mēmṛā*, it is time to revisit the questions raised earlier concerning the christological titles and dating. Every piece of Narsai's homily contributes to the end of defending the veneration of the cross, and any attempt to place the *mēmṛā* in a wider historical context must take this into account. It is certainly true that Narsai prefers the christological titles "crucified Man" and "crucified King" in this *mēmṛā*, and that the Trisagion controversy involved similar terms. From beginning to end, Narsai proudly displays his East Syrian christology, as when he speaks of the Lord assuming "the garment of our body"⁶⁶ or says, "upon Golgotha he appeared on the cross in the temple of his body."⁶⁷ However, one need not interpret any of these statements as overt polemic against the Miaphysite addition to the Trisagion. Narsai may simply have been using the theological idiom that he assumed his audience shared. This stands in marked contrast to another East Syrian *mēmṛā* for the same feast day by a certain David Eskolaya.⁶⁸ David Eskolaya took great pains to argue against Miaphysites (whom he calls "crucifiers of the Word") that only "the Man who was assumed"⁶⁹ died on the cross. It is far more likely that Narsai privileges the titles of *gabrā* / *malkā šlibā* to emphasize the close connection between worship of "the crucified One" (*šlibā*) and venerating his cross (*šlibā*). Thus, the argument for dating could just as well be made in the opposite direction: The absence of discernible polemic against the Trisagion in "On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross" might suggest a date *prior* to the controversy rather than contemporary with or just after it. If this were the case, Narsai would have composed the *mēmṛā* after his departure from Edessa *circa* 471 and before the Trisagion controversy and Philoxenus' *Letter to the Monks of Tell 'Ada* in 482–484. It is perhaps more likely, however, that the absence of clear polemic against

⁶⁵ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.130.20–22).

⁶⁶ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.114.11).

⁶⁷ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.130.6).

⁶⁸ David Eskolaya's sole extant *mēmṛā* apparently circulated with Narsai's works and was published with them in Mar Eshai Shimon XXIII, *Homilies of Mar Narsai Published by the Patriarchal Press* (San Francisco, 1970), vol. 1.2, 598–613. All that is known of him is in the scribal title of the *mēmṛā*; he was remembered as a teacher in Kefar 'Ezzā and was reputed to be "a great luminary." For more on Kefar 'Ezzā, see J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne: Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq* (Recherches publiées sous la direction de l'Institut de lettres orientales de Beyrouth 22, 34, 42; Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1965, 1968), vol. 1, 174–176.

⁶⁹ *Homilies of Mar Narsai Published by the Patriarchal Press*, vol. 1.2, 608.

the Trisagion addition has little bearing on the date of the *mēmṛā*'s composition. Narsai's primary concern in this *mēmṛā* is simply defending and promoting the veneration of the cross.

Narsai's focus on the apologetic defense of the veneration of the cross raises other intriguing questions. To whom are his arguments addressed? Why was he compelled to defend the veneration of the cross? There is clear polemic against Jews and pagans throughout the *mēmṛā*, but, especially in the first section, this could easily be interpreted as a literary construct based on 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. In the third section of the *mēmṛā*, Narsai alleges that both Jews and pagans reproach Christians for hypocrisy: Christians accuse others of idolatry, but they themselves venerate the cross, which to the casual observer may seem a transparently idolatrous act. In this section, the tone of the *mēmṛā* shifts; measured rhetoric on traditional theological themes gives way to immediacy and urgency. While the cast of opponents, Jews and pagans, is the same as the first part of the *mēmṛā*, here it could be reasonably interpreted as more than a literary construction of the other. Later, from the seventh century on, debate over the veneration of the cross was a regular feature of actual interreligious dialogue, with both Jews and Muslims. While one ought not to read actual historical encounters into every instance of anti-Jewish or anti-pagan polemic in Syriac literature, it is also problematic to interpret all polemic as mere literary construction. An easily observed practice like the veneration of the cross could naturally attract unwanted criticism from outsiders; it certainly attracted such attention a century later. The question of whether genuine interreligious debate lies behind this *mēmṛā* is perhaps best left open.

At the same time, it seems that some opponents of the veneration of the cross are members of Narsai's community.⁷⁰ As Narsai transitions from types of the cross to the apologetic section, he states, "Whoever is headstrong and contends against these symbols, / he knows that his contention is not against us, | (but) against his Lord who traced out his symbols in every generation; / like a stranger he attacks (the Lord's) types with (the Lord)."⁷¹ While Narsai begins to rebut outsiders' accusations in the next line, here he addresses an insider whom he deems to be behaving "like a stranger" by rejecting the types of the cross in nature and scripture. Narsai's apologetic defense of the cross may begin by answering objections purportedly made by pagans and Jews, but he devotes far more space to exhorting his own community to revere the cross just as they worship their Lord. It is, of course, possible that Narsai is simply "preaching to the choir." Then again, it could be that the Feast of the Cross, a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar, with its heightened emphasis on the cross and its relics,

⁷⁰ During our 2017 workshop, Ute Possekkel suggested this homily may reflect internal conflict in Narsai's community, and I am grateful for her insights.

⁷¹ *Mēmṛā* 54 'On the Finding of the Holy Cross' (ed. Mingana 2.126.5–7).

occasioned internal debate about whether the veneration of the cross was appropriate. It may even be that Narsai sought to reassure those in his community who felt pressure or shame due to non-Christian ridicule of the practice. Whatever the case, Narsai's homily '*On the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross*' provides a valuable window into the life and practices of the East Syrian church that goes beyond the christological controversies of the day. It is a significant precursor to a lively debate over the veneration of the cross that only began to flower in the twilight of Late Antiquity.

Narsai and the Scriptural Self*

Kristian S. Heal

“The love of the just ones called me to set out
on the path of the just, and journey, in the
mind, on the clear road of their way of life.”¹

Narsai had a very clear objective for his audience, and indeed for himself; namely to become like the scriptural figures whose lives were so often the focus of his homilies. As much as Narsai was concerned to clarify and explain the scriptures as an exegete, and to teach doctrine as a theologian, we should not forget that a central concern of his work was pastoral, and thus protreptic. He repeatedly called people to measure their lives against the biblical saints, and change accordingly. In other words, Narsai believed in the pursuit of the scriptural self, a term I borrow from the Middle English scholar John Alford. In essence, the scriptural self is the self modeled upon biblical exemplars. Christians recognized from the earliest period that the Bible offered an abundance of exemplary figures who could serve as patterns of the Christian life (e.g., Heb 11). Moreover, they also recognized that there is a kind of ineluctable magnetism in these figures that, as Gregory the Great said of such figures, “excites the hearts of the weak to imitate them.”² The Old Testament narratives and figures thus served as a spiritual schoolmaster to the maturing Christian, and in particular to the Christian holy men and women.

In this article we will examine Narsai’s notion of exemplarity and the pursuit of the scriptural self. We will pursue this theme in two stages. Firstly, we will examine some of the ways that he described the biblical exemplars, focusing not so much on how he shows they are exemplary, but rather on how he strives to convey a sense of the attractiveness of their way of life. Secondly, we will examine

* I am grateful to Joseph Witztum (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) who read an earlier draft of this article and offered several valuable suggestions and corrections. Naturally, I lay claim to all remaining errors.

¹ *Mēmra 70 ‘On Joseph’*, 1–2 (ed. Mingana 2.265.6–7):

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² Quoted in J.A. Alford, “The Scriptural Self,” in B.S. Levy (ed.), *The Bible in the Middle Ages* (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 1–21, at 2, where Gregory is also cited as saying, “We ought to transform what we read into our very selves.”

some examples of the language and images that he used to encourage and enable his audience to pattern their lives after them.³

Narsai often describes the biblical saints as a company or companionship (*lwiṭā*). In the Peshiṭta this term refers to a company of travelers, such as in Luke 2:44, where it is used for the company in which Jesus' parents traveled, and Acts 19:29, to refer to Paul's traveling companions. It functions in the same sense in Narsai, as when he admonishes his audience, and himself, to set out with (*hṣaq*) or go out (*nḥaq*) and travel with this company. Thus, in the opening of the *mēmṛā* on Joseph Narsai describes in striking terms how the love of the just ones (*kēnē*) encouraged him to set out on their path by calling out to him, "Get up lazy, (and) set out in the company of the industrious ones."⁴ The company is known by names that describe the travelers, including the one used here, or in terms that describe the attributes of the company. Thus, it is the company of the wise virgins (*lwiṭā dhakkimātā*),⁵ the company of humility (*lwiṭā dmakkikutā*),⁶ or simply the fair company (*lwiṭā pe[']tā*).⁷

Above all, however, this is a company on the move, and the path or way (*urḥā*) upon which they are traveling is described both by its attributes and in terms of the journey that is taking place upon it.⁸ Narsai's path is of course in origin the narrow path of the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Mt 7:14),⁹ and the Way of earliest Christianity (Acts 9:2 etc), but in Narsai the attributes of the path proliferate. In the *mēmṛā* on Joseph Narsai uses a favorite collocation, referring to the 'clear path' (*urḥā špītā*), most likely implying both a path unencumbered by obstacles and a path that is serene.¹⁰ Elsewhere it is the path of sweetness (*urḥā*

³ This is only intended to be a first foray into this topic, rather than an exhaustive treatment. As such, I have limited the scope of my analysis to *Mēmṛā* 70 'On Joseph' (ed. Mingana 2.265–88), *Mēmṛā* 69 'On Job' (ed. Mingana 2.254–64), and *Mēmṛā* 19 'On Works' (Patriarchal Press 2.596–617). Other *mēmṛē* are occasionally cited to help indicate the breadth of particular themes.

⁴ *Mēmṛā* 70 'On Joseph', 4 (ed. Mingana 2.265.8): ܡܡܪܐ ܕܝܫܥܐ ܕܝܫܥܐ ܕܝܫܥܐ ܕܝܫܥܐ

⁵ *Mēmṛā* 7 'On John the Baptist', 485 (ms. Brit. Libr. Or. 5463, f. 42v.18), *Mēmṛā* 24 'On Lent IV', 261 (ed. Mingana 1.203.9).

⁶ *Mēmṛā* 50 'On Humility', 226 (ms. Brit. Libr. Or. 5463, f. 323r.3).

⁷ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 1 (ms. Brit. Libr. Or. 5463, f. 270r.5).

⁸ Narsai also uses the synonym *šbīlā*, as in *Mēmṛā* 70 'On Joseph', 1 (ed. Mingana 2.265.6). There is a long history of the use of the image of the path or way to indicate moral direction. See, for example, N. Worman, *Landscape and the Spaces of Metaphor in Ancient Literary Theory and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 73–78. For an excellent treatment of this theme in fourth-century sources, see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 246–249, 299–301.

⁹ Cf. *Mēmṛā* 42 'On the Martyrs', 47 (ed. Mingana 2.47.20) and elsewhere, which have the collocation *urḥā 'aliṣā*.

¹⁰ *Mēmṛā* 70 'On Joseph', 2 (ed. Mingana 2.265.7). Narsai also uses this adjective to describe the nature of the spiritual eye, as in *Mēmṛā* 24 'On Lent IV', 57 (ed. Mingana 1.197.8), "Look steadily with the clear eye of discernment." On this collocation in Ephrem, see S. P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 73–74.

dḥassimuṭā);¹¹ the path to the Kingdom (*ʾurḥā lmalkuṭā*);¹² the path of faith (*ʾurḥā dhaymānuṭā*);¹³ the path the ancients trod (*ʾurḥā dḍarraš[w] qaḍmāyē*);¹⁴ the path the just ones trod (*ʾurḥā dḍarraš[w] kēnē*);¹⁵ and the path of the scriptures (*ʾurḥā dseṗrē*).¹⁶

Upon this path the saints throughout time pursued their various courses, living in a manner or way of life (*dubbārē*) that is exemplary and worthy of emulation. The path to which Narsai was called in the opening of the *mēmṛā* on Joseph is precisely the way of life of the saints.¹⁷ However, Narsai was not called upon a physical journey, for as Georgia Frank observed in connection with early Christian pilgrimage, “The first step for any pilgrim lands not on the road, but somewhere in the imagination.”¹⁸ However, whereas the pilgrim sought to walk *where* the saints had walked, Narsai sought to walk *as* the saints had walked. In the mind (*bhawnā*), or in the imagination, one could view the way of life of the just ones, and journey with them.¹⁹ The principal objective of Narsai’s *mēmṛē* on Joseph and Job is to take his congregation on this journey, and in doing so to provide them with an object of emulation. These *mēmṛē*, in turn, are the product of Narsai’s own journey with the just, as he lived or imagined himself into scripture in order to draw out what would be most profitable for his congregation.

There are a number of vital virtues to which Narsai returns again and again, and which he seeks to illustrate by precept and, in particular, by example. He works with a much smaller canon of exemplary figures than does Aphrahat,²⁰ and in the surviving corpus it is only to a few of these figures, such as Abraham, David, Job, Samson, and Joseph, that Narsai devotes an entire *mēmṛā*. However, there is good reason to doubt that we have all, or even most of Narsai’s corpus, and it seems very likely that he wrote more *mēmṛē* devoted to individual figures.²¹ Fortunately, in some of the surviving *mēmṛē* Narsai provided what may be

¹¹ *Mēmṛā* 23 ‘On Lent III’, 110 (ed. Mingana 1.185.2).

¹² *Mēmṛā* 53 ‘On the Wheat and the Tares’, 122 (ed. Siman 90).

¹³ *Mēmṛā* 76 ‘On Enoch and Elijah’, 477 (ed. Frishman 1.18).

¹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 53 ‘On the Wheat and the Tares’, 200 (ed. Siman 96).

¹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 53 ‘On the Wheat and the Tares’, 240 (ed. Siman 99).

¹⁶ *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets II’, 178 (ed. Mingana 1.34.16). In *Mēmṛā* 53 ‘On the Wheat and the Tares’, 147 (ed. Siman 92), this commendable path is contrasted with the “new path” (*ʾurḥā ḥaḍṭā*), which is “a counterfeit path” (*šḥilā dziṗā*), prepared by the enemies of the spirit.

¹⁷ *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘On Joseph’, 2 (ed. Mingana 2.265.6–7).

¹⁸ G. Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁹ *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘On Joseph’, 2 (ed. Mingana 2.265.6). Text given in fn. 1 above.

²⁰ Cf. R. Murray, “Some Rhetorical Patterns in Early Syriac Literature,” in R. H. Fischer (ed.), *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1977), 109–131.

²¹ It is likely that there were once in excess of 300 *mēmṛē*. Cf. J. Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai* (Ph.D., Universiteit Leiden, 1992), 3.6, who summarizes the sources for this statement.

considered his canonical lists of exemplary figures for particular topics. In his *Mēmṛā* 2 ‘*On the Divine Revelations*’, for example, Narsai systematically treats the revelations given to men from Adam until Paul, giving numerous examples of the different types of revelations that he identifies.²²

Of more relevance to us is *Mēmṛā* 19 ‘*On Works*’,²³ in which Narsai provides a list of those Old Testament figures whose behavior Narsai considered to be morally exemplary. Frishman has usefully reviewed the contents of this *mēmṛā*, noting that Narsai focused on the following figures:²⁴ Abel,²⁵ Enoch,²⁶ Noah,²⁷ Shem, Abraham,²⁸ Isaac, Jacob, Joseph,²⁹ Moses,³⁰ Joshua, Job,³¹ Barak, Gideon, Jephtha, Samson,³² Samuel, and David.³³ This is more than a list of prominent Old Testament figures. Instead, we should view it as a synopsis, through exemplars, of what Narsai considered to be essential Christian virtues. The selection principles and purpose of the synopsis are laid out in the long preface, and it is important that Narsai’s introductory remarks are read together with the comments made about particular exemplary figures. This *mēmṛā*, together with the more extended and specific discussions in the *mēmṛē* on Joseph and Job, will help us build a good, if preliminary, picture of Narsai’s vision of the scriptural saints and how they were to be imitated by his audience.

Narsai treats the saints in both general and particular terms. There are a small number of particular virtues that Narsai considered to be exemplified by certain figures, but which are rarely applied to the saints as a whole. For example, Abel and Shem exemplify purity (*ḏak̄yutā*),³⁴ while Noah possessed a peculiar serenity (*niḥuṭā*).³⁵ Joseph is called the chaste or modest one (*yawseḫ nakkpā*),³⁶ while Noah is given the epithets “the just” (*noḥ kēnā*), “the righteous” (*noḥ zaddiqā*),³⁷

²² Frishman reviews and discusses the *mēmṛā* in detail in *Ways and Means*, 3.26–30.

²³ Ed. Patriarchal Press 2.596–617.

²⁴ *Ways and Means*, 3.24–26. Frishman’s review is focused on the second part of the *mēmṛā*. The long prologue is also incorporated into the discussion below.

²⁵ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 49 ‘*On Creation IV*’, 306–417 (ed. Gignoux 210–219). Cf. Jacob of Serugh, who treats the story of Cain and Abel in a series of four *mēmṛē* (ed. Bedjan, 5.1–61).

²⁶ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 76 ‘*On Enoch and Elijah*’ (ed. Frishman 1.1–20).

²⁷ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 71 ‘*On the Flood*’ (ed. Frishman 1.21–51).

²⁸ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 3 ‘*On Revelations to Abraham*’ (ed. Mingana 1.57–68).

²⁹ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘*On Joseph*’ (ed. Mingana 2.265–282).

³⁰ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 72 ‘*On the Miracles of Moses*’ (ed. Mingana 2.288–302).

³¹ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 69 ‘*On Job*’ (ed. Mingana 2.254–264).

³² Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 73 ‘*On Samson*’ (ed. Mingana 2.303–314).

³³ Treated further in *Mēmṛā* 74 ‘*On David and Saul*’ (ed. Patriarch Press 2.773–796). Narsai also discusses the later kings Hezekiah and Josiah (f. 320v).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā* 19 ‘*On Works*’, 243–245 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.606.6–8).

³⁵ *Mēmṛā* 19 ‘*On Works*’, 257 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.606.20). Note the play between the name of Noah (*noḥ*) and this virtue.

³⁶ *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘*On Joseph*’, 111 (ed. Mingana 2.269.12–13).

³⁷ *Mēmṛā* 54 ‘*On the Cross*’, 101 (ed. Mingana 2.117.3 “just,” 4–5 “righteous”). The first of these epithets is more commonly applied to the saints, as is the epithet “just one.”

The saints are victorious as spiritual athletes or warriors (*ʿatlēlā*), whether it be in the contest (*ʿaḡonā* and *taktuṣā*), in the arena (*ʿeṣṭādyun*), or in battle (*qirsā*).⁴⁷ The location of the contest and the combatants with which the saints are fighting are essentially identical. They are struggling with the flesh and the “appetites of the flesh” (*rḡaṭ paḡrā*).⁴⁸ Their contest is with the physical impulses (*zawʿe*),

فِي دَعْوَا لِنُجْدَا هَلْبَسْتُمْ هُجْرَتِ بَحْبُوتِ :
دِيستِ هُوَ ، قَلْبِي ذَهَبْتِي بِمُحَمَّدِ دَسْتِ ❖

⁴⁸ *Mēmra* 70 'On Joseph', 800 (ed. Mingana 2.288.1).

A key to taking hold of this promised victory is the pursuit of the scriptural self. In the *mēmṛē* on Joseph and Job, Narsai introduces some of the ways by which the congregation could make of their own lives a scriptural self. In the *mēmṛā* on Joseph, Narsai admonishes the congregation to respond in kind to the sheer persuasiveness of the exemplary lives of the saints. The audience are to allow themselves to be enticed, as he is, by the saints into a new way of life.⁶¹ By viewing, for example, the modesty of Joseph, and seeing that he was not defiled by the lusts of his body, the auditors of his life will “set the bridles on the senses of (their) body, lest it grow wild.” The object is not only to be like Joseph, to triumph as he did, to make war with enticement *in his likeness*, but to join him, to enter the “stadium that is full of sufferings” *with him*, and then to “ascend *with him* to the victory of the payment of the reward.”⁶² It is a pilgrimage of the soul,

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ: ﴿١﴾
مُتَّعْتُم مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ

⁶⁰ *Mēmra* 19 'On Works', 13–14 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.596.16–17):

وَمِنْهُمْ مَن يَخُصُّكَ فِي الْوَيْلِ وَكَانَ فِي الْهَيْلِ
وَمِنْهُمْ مَن يَخُصُّكَ فِي الْوَيْلِ وَكَانَ فِي الْهَيْلِ

سَمْعَهُ، يُذَلِّلُ بِمَعْنَى يُلَيِّسُ دَلِيلًا لِقَوْلِهِ مَلَقْنَا:

⁶² *Mēmra* 70 'On Joseph', 801–6 (ed. Mingana 2.288.2–5):

❖ جِسْمِ رَحْمَتِ اِلهِا دَرْدَنَدِک دَوَسْتِیَہ
 ❖ مَیْیَہِیَہ قَلْبِیَہ حَاقِیَہ قَلْبِیَہ دِلِیَہ رَحْمَتِ اِلهِیَہ
 ❖ دَرْدَنَدِک دَوَسْتِیَہ جِسْمِ رَحْمَتِ اِلهِیَہ
 ❖ جِسْمِ رَحْمَتِ اِلهِیَہ دَرْدَنَدِک دَوَسْتِیَہ
 ❖ دَرْدَنَدِک دَوَسْتِیَہ جِسْمِ رَحْمَتِ اِلهِیَہ

“In him he will observe one who ran spiritually,
And he will set the bridles on the senses of his body lest it grow wild.

as it does in the great spiritual writers of the seventh and eighth centuries. Nevertheless, the image plays a significant role in his doctrine of moral and spiritual exemplarity, and it would seem worthwhile to devote a little more attention than has been hitherto devoted to how the image functions in Narsai's hands.⁶⁸

The first question to ask is what one sees in this mirror, for this will tell us, among other things, how Narsai conceived the self and how he conceived that the self-beheld could be made into a scriptural self. To summarize, Narsai holds up the mirror to the faithful not so that they can see a particular scriptural character but rather to behold the nature, ways, attributes, and doctrines of the just ones in general, or of a certain just man or woman in particular. For Narsai, the inner person was simply the sum of how he behaved, the virtues or vices he adopted and what he believed, and in each of these areas one was either emulating the just, or following the devil. Viewing themselves in the mirror of the just allowed the congregation to take a personal inventory, to analyze themselves, and to see the extent to which they measured up to the life of the just, or the extent to which they needed to scrub off the filth or dirt of vice.

Though Narsai's spiritual mirror is held up to expose the moral blemishes and carnal filth that has adhered to the beholder, it is not intended to present an intractable image. The mirror is not a metaphor of judgment – it is not being held up to condemn those who are brave enough to gaze upon it. Rather, the mirror is a deeply optimistic image, one of a collection of images that Narsai uses to describe his view of the economy of spiritual progression, or the process by which a Christian joins the fair company of the just. Narsai seems to be writing for a community of aspiring Christians, and he is clearly anxious for their spiritual welfare. He sets the biblical saints up as moral exemplars, sure guides, and prospective spiritual companions for those who would follow in their shining ways. He wants his congregation to become part of a new spiritual economy, one quite distinct from the ways and concerns of the world. Thus they are to trade with the word of the Lord and work in his vineyard. Moreover they are to be spiritual warriors, fellow combatants with Christ, who wear the spiritual armor and fight in the contest with the lusts of the flesh and spiritual adversaries.

That the spiritual mirror was to be used by both men and women is seen in *Mēmra* 3 'On the Revelations to Abraham'. Here, Narsai holds up both the way of life, and the beauty (*šuprā*) of Abraham as mirrors,⁶⁹ but then goes on to add that Sarah in particular should be seen "as a mirror to the daughters of Eve."⁷⁰ In fact, it seems that this metaphor is considered by Narsai to have particular appeal to women. In the first *mēmra* on Lent, for example, Narsai admonished the women

⁶⁸ Brock simply notes that "Narsai, Jacob of Serugh and the various Isaacs, all make use of the mirror every now and then." (S.P. Brock, "The Imagery of the Spiritual Mirror in Syriac Literature," *JCSSS* 5 [2005]: 10).

⁶⁹ *Mēmra* 3 'On the Revelations to Abraham', 343–356 (ed. Mingana 1.67.16–68.2).

⁷⁰ *Mēmra* 3 'On the Revelations to Abraham', 365 (ed. Mingana 1.68.7).

of the congregation to gaze “on the beauty of the (Lenten) fast like a mirror, And scour away the defects of your mind as those of your face.”⁷¹ The verb here used to scour or wash away defects (*mraq*) is used elsewhere in Narsai’s description of Potiphar’s wife preparing and beautifying herself for Joseph,⁷² and shows that Narsai is using the language of everyday activities to make the quest for the scriptural self more accessible and memorable.

Later in the Lenten cycle Narsai again addresses the women in the audience specifically. Here he not only admonishes them to “fix the purity (of faith) like a mirror before (their) mind” but actually to become a spiritual mirror to those who look upon them. In particular, Narsai is concerned that the women “put the garment of modesty” on both mind and body, so that they might be a “mirror instead of a snare to the eyes of men.”⁷³ By affirming that it need not only be sin that is in the eye of the beheld,⁷⁴ but also virtue, Narsai moves beyond the view of woman as simply “the devil’s gateway.”⁷⁵

Although women cannot be publicly exemplary by their performance of the mysteries, in offering to women the chance to become spiritual mirrors through the emulation of biblical women of faith Narsai extends to them a more public and permanent role within the community of believers. Moreover, he provides a way for women to reconceptualize their bodies. They need no longer bear the shame of the daughters of Eve, viewing their bodies solely as snares that make men fallen. Rather, Narsai offers women a new parentage, one that teaches them that their bodies can be viewed as mirrors that make men faithful. This, it seems, is why Narsai holds up Mary and her sister Martha as spiritual mirrors,⁷⁶ as well as Hannah. Narsai’s treatment of Hannah is particularly interesting because of the way in which he pushes the metaphor further than simply holding up the perseverance of Hannah as a model to the women of the congregation.⁷⁷ He is emphatic that the women who hear his voice are of the same kind or sex (*gensā*)

⁷¹ *Mēmra* 20 ‘On Lent’, 190–191 (ed. Mingana 1.173.6–7).

⁷² *Mēmra* 70 ‘On Joseph’, 413 (ed. Mingana 2.277.5–6).

⁷³ *Mēmra* 24 ‘On Lent IV’, 456–461 (ed. Mingana 1.208.23–209.3).

⁷⁴ It is of course possible that Narsai was not accusing all women of being snares, only those who wished to be looked upon. Cf. Ambrose, who affirms that, “If any woman gazes with wanton eyes, the sin is attributable only to her who cast the wicked glance, not to him who did not wish to be looked upon with wicked intent, and there is no guilt in the fact that he was looked upon.” (Ambrose, *On Joseph*, 5.22; trans. McHugh, *St. Ambrose*, 203).

⁷⁵ Tertullian, *On the Dress of Women*, I.1.2, from the translation in E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (MFC 13; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 39.

⁷⁶ *Mēmra* 28 ‘On the Raising of Lazarus’, 67–70 (ed. Patriarch Press 1.343.23–344.2).

⁷⁷ *Mēmra* 80 ‘On the Reproof of Women’, 216 (ed. Mingana 2.365.6–7; trans. C. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof of Eve’s Daughters and the ‘Tricks and Devices’ They Perform,” *Le Muséon* 106 [1993]: 87):

بَنَاتُ يَسُوعَ بَنَاتُ يَسُوعَ لَكِنَّتُ بَقِيَّةَ
بَنَاتُ يَسُوعَ بَنَاتُ يَسُوعَ لَكِنَّتُ بَقِيَّةَ

“Let Hannah be a mirror for the eyes of your soul
and gain perseverance through her perseverance at the day of trial.”

as Hannah, Sarah, and Rebekah and are thus just as able as they to “proceed on the path of their perseverance and desist from fear.”⁷⁸

For Narsai then, there is no ontological gap separating the Christians of his day from the ancient just ones, no chasm that divides those declared righteous from those who aspire to be so. All may partake of the aid of Christ and be victorious in the battle against the chief of the air. All may acquire the virtues possessed by Abraham, Sarah, Job, and Hannah, or any of the just ones whom Narsai raises up as models of the scriptural self. Thus, it would seem that just as Jacob held up Joseph to inspire a zeal for righteousness in his brothers, so too Narsai holds up the ancient just to inspire that same zeal in all who would hear and take heed to his sermons, “Saying, if (you) are declared righteous (you) will be loved like Joseph.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘On the Reproof of Women’, 217 (ed. Mingana 2.365.8–9; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof of Eve’s Daughters and the ‘Tricks and Devices’ They Perform,” 87). For a recent survey of the role of women in the early Syriac church, see S.A. Harvey, “Women in the Syrian Tradition,” in P. Vazheparampil (ed.), *Woman in Prism and Focus: Her Profile in Major World Religions and in Christian Traditions* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996), 69–80. See also eadem, *Song and Memory: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010).

⁷⁹ *Mēmṛā* 70 ‘On Joseph’, 86 (ed. Mingana 2.267.19).

The Ascetic Narsai

Ascetical and Monastic Practice and Theology in the *Mēmnrē* of Narsai

Robert A. Kitchen

An Ascetical Introduction

Asceticism is too big a topic, for while defining *askesis* is not easy, it is easier than trying to comprehend the diversity of its phenomena. There was a time when the study of asceticism was the provenance of early and medieval Christianity, but we are no longer alone in that study. Many other world religions have well-developed ascetical practices and institutions, and within Christianity a number of heterodox communities are driven by ascetical impulses and methods.

The “ascetical imperative,” as coined by Geoffrey Harpham in his 1987 book which moves from Anthony of the Egyptian desert to the “ascetics of interpretation,” begins by describing the much broader scope of the original definition of *askesis* as “training, exercise, discipline.”¹ The ascetical imperative has been found to describe philosophical ventures, as with Michel Foucault’s definition of *askesis* as “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.”² While Foucault steers away from the traditional sense of asceticism as self-denial, he does observe that the practice of philosophy is “an attempt to get free of oneself” or “straying afield of oneself.”³

Systematic theologians have generally steered clear of asceticism with notable exceptions. Sarah Coakley has embarked on the call for “The New Asceticism,” developing not only out of theological rigour, particularly around gender issues, but also from her pastoral experience. Coakley values asceticism in its manner of “practices” – “the commitment to the discipline of *particular* graced bodily practices which, over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of

¹ G.G. Harpham, *The Ascetical Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). Also, G.G. Harpham, “Response: Old Water in New Bottles: The Contemporary Prospects for the Study of Asceticism,” in V.L. Wimbush (ed.), *Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety and the Interpretation of Early Christian Literature*, Part 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 135–148.

² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2. *The Use of Pleasure* (trans. R. Hurley; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8, cited by E.F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xii.

³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 8.

knowing.”⁴ She categorizes this *askesis* as a “theology of deepening practices” in which practices, physical and contemplative, carried out over a lifetime invert the traditional order of religious beliefs dictating particular religious practices. She refers to the narrative of the Desert Fathers in which “the hermit goes back to basics day by day as he is reminded of the frailty of his endeavours.”⁵

A pertinent application of Coakley’s approach to asceticism has been employed by Tim Vivian in his interpretation of the Greek vita of Pshoi (Bishoy), the late-fourth-/early-fifth-century Coptic desert father of Sketis.⁶ Vivian sees that Coakley’s starting point for asceticism of “desire” (*eros*) transformed into the rightly ordered desire for God, “a profound allure that animates us to God,” resonates with the strivings of Pshoi. The desert father is depicted as persistently practicing the grace and holiness of God, imitating Antony the Great and Christ in aiding countless suffering people and developing his own humble holy way of life.⁷

In his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, a pastoral exegesis of the Book of Jonah, Eugene Peterson, the Presbyterian pastor-cum-pastoral theologian and biblical translator, discusses the use of the word *askesis* as analogous to that of the training of an athlete, which grows by its very confinement and intensification in the ascetic: “The particular *askesis* that each person embraces varies, but without an *askesis*, a time and place of confinement and concentration, there is no energy of spirit.”⁸

Michael Allen delivered one of the keynote addresses at the 2017 Los Angeles Theology Conference on “Dogmatics as Ascetics,” focusing on what he terms “intellectual asceticism,” by which the theologian ascetically restricts her field of thinking to the Scriptures. Allen compares John Webster’s thoughts on theology as holy reason with Coakley’s systematic theology, of which he approves her rigour and commitment to combatting idolatry. However, Allen drifts away from the ascetical functions of dogmatics to a critique of Coakley’s extensive approach to theology, rather than an intensive focus upon Scripture.⁹

Several recent monographs steer the student of asceticism on a different path. David Fagerberg’s *On Liturgical Asceticism* depicts the essential ascetical element

⁴ S. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15–20, esp. 19.

⁵ S. Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 101–127, esp. 122–123.

⁶ T. Vivian, “A Spirituality of Desire: A Meditation on the Life of Pshoi vis-à-vis *The New Asceticism* by Sarah Coakley,” *CSQ* 53 (2018): 9–31.

⁷ M. S. A. Mikhail and T. Vivian, *A Spirituality of Desire: The Life of Pshoi* (CS 277; Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, forthcoming).

⁸ E. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 74–75.

⁹ O. D. Crisp and F. Sanders (eds.), *The Task of Dogmatics: Exploration in Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

in Orthodox liturgy.¹⁰ P. Booth's *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* demonstrates how after Chalcedon, the revival of the Eucharist became the central identifier in a number of movements as the essential aspect of authentic holiness.¹¹ Derek Krueger's *Writing and Holiness* and Elizabeth Clark's *Reading Renunciation* are critical works for understanding how authors wrote about asceticism, with which is the medium we largely deal here.¹²

Our concern is with the pervasiveness of asceticism as the face or character of Syriac Christianity in its classical period and beyond.¹³ Narsai matured in a monastic environment in Sasanian Persia and would then study and teach at the School of Edessa and later at the School of Nisibis where he became the head teacher and exegete for several decades before his death. The administration of the School and its educational regimen were marked by a monastic and ascetic routine in conjunction with its intellectual demands. Narsai is known for his metrical homilies, but he was no stranger to asceticism.

The seminal work of the previous generation, the three-volume *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* by Arthur Vööbus mentions Narsai a number of times in connection with his early life and subsequent teaching and direction at the Schools of Edessa and Nisibis but does not examine his metrical homilies or describe his theology of asceticism.¹⁴

Sections of four metrical homilies by Narsai will be examined: *Mēmṛā 19 'On Works'*, *Mēmṛā 14 'On Jonah the Prophet'*, *Mēmṛā 77 'On the Three Children'*, and *Mēmṛā 13 'On Supplication and Fasting'*. Each of these *mēmṛē* presents us with different aspects of Narsai's ascetical teaching and hermeneutical method.

¹⁰ D. W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

¹¹ P. Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹² D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); E. A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹³ Discussion during the conference *Narsai: Rethinking His Work and His World* returned several times to the frequently used Syriac term, *pārošutā* "discernment" (see Craig Morrison's contribution to this volume [pp. 161–173]). *Pārošutā* may be understood as an intellectual form of *askesis*, as noted above. The person exercising *pārošutā* needs to discipline him/herself from impulsive, emotional, and inappropriate thoughts, words, and actions, and make wise, effective, and compassionate decisions for the benefit of the people and situations involved. See A. D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Διάκρισις in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), esp. Chapters 4 and 5, 123–229.

¹⁴ A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East* (CSCO 184, 197, 500; Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1958, 1960, 1988).

Perfection of *Dubbārē*

If there is a *mēmṛā* by Narsai that focuses on the ideals and practices of asceticism, it is *Mēmṛā 19 'On Works', or 'On the Perfection of the Ways of Life (dubbārē)*'.¹⁵ The Syriac word *dubbārē* is a multivalent term that can mean "order, rule, government, agreement, custom, manners," but most frequently it is related to asceticism and monasticism, "the monastic rule, discipline, the ascetic life." This *mēmṛā* is a call to engage in the ascetical life. The biblical narratives and characters referred to are models and illustrations of asceticism, not the focus of exegesis and interpretation of their biblical context.

The poem begins with the athlete/wrestler imagery from a decided Christological bias:

One athlete descended to the contest of righteousness,
and through his courageousness, mortals acquired good hope.
One athlete was resurrected to the contest of righteousness,
and through his courageousness mortals acquired good hope.
One wrestler initiated the match with the Almighty One,
and through his persistence the earthly creatures strengthened their minds. (5–10)

Christ as athlete is not an unfamiliar image, and here the implication for the congregation is that the imitation of Christ summons one to an ascetical life-style (*dubbārē*) in order to attain the spiritual life in the midst of worldly enticements.

Come, be diligent to acquire spiritual life,
and despise the cultivation of earthly matters that are not authentic.
Come, become accustomed in the study of blessings which hide in myself,
and despise and cast away the despicable customs of things which pass away. (21–24)

Through the voice of Christ, Narsai begins to lay out the methods necessary to compete in this contest.

So then, it is the time to show to the warriors
the battle armours full of the battle against the passions.
Let us openly speak of the reason of the *mēmṛā* prepared for us
before the listeners who love the report of spiritual matters. (51–54)

Come, wayfarers, for the way of life is beloved to them,
Travel with our story, receive the expectation of the new life.
In love let us hear the story of spiritual lives,
and through the intellect let us heed the meaning of the secrets. (71–74)

Narsai moves to the transformation that asceticism promises, which is both not yet and already.

In the same nature they were victorious over nature and its enticements,
and when in it they become like people who are not them.

¹⁵ Ed. Patriarchal Press 596–617.

They heard that they will come to be in immortal life,
and despised this present life as if it were not alive.
They saw that they were mysteriously made new in baptism,
and put on the likeness of spiritual things upon their senses.
They saw that the time of the reward of their struggles was near,
and predicted what was to come while it had not yet happened. (137–144)

Baptism is the event by which the new person becomes new while still in the world. She no longer lives as a mortal, but since Christ lives in her, she lives as it were in heaven – a realized eschatology.

The faithful depicted the world to come in their ways of life,
and placed it in the land in the likeness of an image before those who see. (145–146)

Narsai proceeds through the traditional ascetical labours:

By fasting, they showed that without eating the body still lives,
and by prayers which spiritually became the answer of the soul.
By vigil, they taught that without repentance mortal nature sleeps,
and by psalms, that without flinching they sing praise.
By despising riches, they investigate the wealth hidden in heaven,
and by despicable things they walked the road to glorified things.
They fasted from bread, not because they hated eating it,
but so that they might turn towards that way of life which is without eating.
They left behind marriage, not because the intercourse of his people was filthy,
but so that they might become as they would come to be there. (149–158)

None of these traditional labours are perceived as ends in themselves, but they point to and demonstrate the means by which one is able to live in the next world while still alive in this one. This, nevertheless, creates a definite ambiguity about life in this world, especially with other people.

They hated the conversation of earthly matters while they were earthly,
and loved the studies of spiritual things while they were far away. (163–164)

They calmed anger, humbled pride, overthrew envy,
and did not permit the little toe to run according to its will.
The chaste cast chaste bridles on the body's desire,
and while it was fast they made it run sluggishly. (167–170)

Speaking of little toes, Narsai describes what the members of the body – eyes, ears, hand and foot – are called to do.

They compelled every nature to imitate that which is not its nature,
and cast away its own and began to imitate what is not its own. (185–186)

The new world begins for Narsai in one's own body. A remarkable direction taken by Narsai is to declare that the creation of humanity has changed in substance. Through the ascetical *dubbārē*, we can and have become a different and higher form of dust.

Something new happened to the sons of Adam, the soil of the earth,
 and they changed the dust through their ways of life to spiritual gold.
 Adam was formed of the earth through hands not composite,
 who made you so that your nature might stray with that which is not your nature?
 Your nature is dust and your nature testifies that your dust is dust,
 but the way of salvation which you have now taken hold of is higher than your dust.
 (205–210)

Narsai continues to make clear that this is not merely theoretical, but there is an historical witness. He invites the congregation to read what is in scripture.

Extend your mind to the way of life of your race,
 and see the truth of what I have said regarding their achievements.
 Journey in the companionship of the books of the Spirit with the intellect's legs,
 and travel well to the just encounter of the labours which are in them.
 Continue the journey from the beginning of humanity's beginning,
 and place signs in the dwellings of their ways of life.
 Enter the libraries of the books which are the king of kings,
 and read the stories full of a hundred human triumphs. (234–241)

Narsai then recites and interprets the tales starting with Abel, Enoch, and Noah, and subsequently Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua. He moves on to Job, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson, Samuel and David, Hezekiah and Josiah – his own version of the “Cloud of Witnesses.”

The purpose for reading these tales and taking them to heart is not unlike other “Cloud of Witnesses” collections, except that Narsai sees monks being the first beneficiaries of such holy behaviour.

The excellent abundance of their ways of life they leave behind in the creation,
 so that the needy of the monastery might benefit by it and acquire salvation.
 They showed those kinds of spiritual endeavor,
 and people learned to benefit spiritually.
 They constructed ships of love and tied (them) onto their mind,
 and sent them into the rough sea of the body's passions.
 They made the new craft go out among the earthly ones,
 so that people, labourers on the earth, might become heavenly ones. (453–460)

Narsai concludes with encouragement to his listeners to continue in the *dubbārē*:

May the power of the way of life surpass mortality,
 lest it destroy it by the abandonment of its mortality.
 By faith, let us strengthen its weakness which bears the weak ones,
 and let us not abandon and become drowning water.
 In love, let us renounce the sinister perspiration of our passions,
 lest the smells of iniquity grow old in us, making hateful that which is beautiful.
 In hope, let us gird up the building of our soul as if with leather straps,
 lest the breaths of animalistic passions rebuke it.
 Let us build truth upon the foundation which the ancients established,
 and according to their labours let us order the course of our speech.

Let us imitate them by the labour of spiritual life,
and let us depict in ourselves the image of the image of their ways of life. (501–512)

The Ascetical Jonah

The lives of the saints typically draw on biblical images and typologies to explain ascetical choices, and homilists often portray biblical characters and events as models of ascetical behaviour. Narsai's homilies explain the liturgies and holy days of the Christian calendar, others focus on spiritual and ascetical traits, and many are exegeses of biblical narratives and personalities.

Narsai's *Mēmra* 14 'On Jonah' falls into the latter category, an exegesis of the entire biblical book in sequence, although not necessarily alighting upon every verse, and thankfully with not the same detail and expansion as Jacob of Serugh did in his five-times longer *mēmra* on Jonah.¹⁶ In several *mēmre* on topics about which both Narsai and Jacob wrote, Narsai's exegesis is usually a more straight-forward, plain reading than Jacob's. Jacob's hermeneutical strategy persistently unveils the typology of Christ in many biblical narratives, especially in homilies treating Old Testament narratives and themes, while normally Narsai does not render the characters as Christological types, sticking to the inner workings and motives of the biblical stories.

Narsai's Jonah is not simple, however, and following Christ's designation of "the Sign of Jonah" (Mt 12:38–45), Narsai emphasizes that Jonah has been the first to walk the three-day road to Sheol and then resurrection, which Christ would later come to walk. Jacob flirts with representing Jonah as a type of Christ, but Narsai does not. He begins by observing how the Nation (or: the People) despised the Nations (or: the Peoples), resulting in the People acting like an only child, puffed up with pride and privilege and arrogance, believing that wealth and privilege belonged to it alone. Jonah receives a revelation and commission from God, but finding God heretical, he attempts to run away to where he cannot hear God – although Narsai notes that Jonah knows God is everywhere. God's heresy, according to Jonah, was being willing to save uncircumcised peoples and thus make them "children of God" along with the Israelites, and the latter wanted no family like that. Moreover, if God gave salvation and privilege to the Nations, would God maintain the Chosen People status of Israel? Can there only be one Chosen People? Finally, Jonah knew God was merciful to those who repented, and if he preached repentance or else to the Ninevites, they would indeed repent, God would forgive them, and Jonah would be left behind as a false pro-

¹⁶ Narsai's *Mēmra* 14 'On Jonah the Prophet' is edited in Mingana 1.134–149 as well as Patriarchal Press 242–263.

phet. Not really, but that is what Jonah imagines his fate would be as a result of God's generosity of spirit.

We know what happens next: Jonah hires a ship to elude the problems, but the *remzā*, God's Sign, Narsai's favourite literary device, pursues the ship and disturbs the sea and ship with a terrible hurricane located only in the precise spot the ship was sailing – all else surrounding them was calm. Jonah was sleeping deeply from depression in the bottom of the ship, and once finally awakened he recognized immediately the cause and target of the storm. The sailors cast lots and when the lot fell on Jonah, he preaches to these uncircumcised sailors about the Universal God, Creator of heaven and earth, in essence, precisely the audience he had fled to avoid. The sailors are stymied about what to do, but Jonah accepts responsibility for the dilemma and tells them to throw him into the sea to calm the storm. The sailors do so reluctantly, and the sea became calm to their worshipful amazement.

The scene shifts under the sea where Jonah has been ensnared into the watery net:

He dug a tomb for the dead one alive in a living body,
 so that he might guard the life of the physical one in a living body.
 The Commandment descended after the fish and drew it up to the heights,
 and (the fish) ascended to receive the life of a living being and buried him inside itself.
 The son of Mattai entered to dwell in the fish, a tomb within a tomb,
 and the Sign closed the door in the face of the living dead one.
 The fugitive descended into a completely dark prison,
 and bound his feet in the moist stocks of the fish's bowels.
 He fled from dry land, but the sea captured him and gave him to the fish,
 and the fish brought him into a tomb which enclosed him in the tomb of the depths.
 For certain, a wonder was achieved through the son of Mattai,
 because he descended still alive into two tombs and was not destroyed.
 For certain, the departed one was escorted to Sheol still alive;
 For certain, the earthly was enshrouded in the body's garment.
 For certain, the mortal was completely buried, but alive while he was dead;
 For certain, the one bound was completely bound up, yet was traveling in a tomb.
 The living mortal was not afraid of the animal by (its) power,
 the Sign preserved him similarly to fetuses in wombs.
 Human life is not sustainable without air,
 yet without air the carnal lives like the spiritual. (213–232)

Narsai's vivid description of Jonah's theological existence in the belly of the great fish prefigures Christ's time in the tomb and descent into Sheol, but it also subtly depicts the ideal condition of the ascetic who aims to be "outside the world." Jonah is now dead to the world, yet alive. The two tombs are the belly of the fish itself, as well as the fish being at the bottom of the depths, that is, Sheol – a prefiguration of Christ's time in the tomb and Sheol.

The ascetic attaining perfection is “no longer am I alive, but Christ lives in me,” in which the physical body no longer participates in the passions of the world. In one sense, the ascetic is dead, not living according to worldly standards, yet is animated and alive in a far more enduring fashion. Narsai is emphatic in detailing the paradox here:

For certain, the departed one was escorted to Sheol still alive;
 For certain, the earthly one was *enshrouded in the body's garment*.
 For certain, the mortal was completely buried, but alive while he was dead;
 For certain, the one bound was completely bound up, yet was traveling in a tomb. (225–228)

The narrative is the biblical story in which Jonah was confined for three days in the belly of the whale, yet there is the image of the confinement of the ascetic to a narrow cell or space without the ability to move normally – one who is labeled a *ḥbušyā*: “The bound one was completely bound up, yet was traveling in a tomb” (228). The ascetic, while confined to a space, is spiritually traveling towards perfection.

Narsai concludes his description of Jonah's state with intriguing metaphors.

The living mortal was not afraid of the animal by (its) power,
 the Sign preserved him in similar fashion to fetuses in wombs.
 Human life is not sustainable without air,
 yet without air the carnal lives like the spiritual.” (229–232)

Jonah is not afraid of this deadly and macabre existence, and the *remzā* preserved him like a fetus in the womb – therefore, someone alive, yet not fully alive, but about to be really alive in a new world. Philoxenos of Mabbug employs roughly the same metaphor, contrasting the fetus departing from the womb in order to enter the world with the monk departing from the world to enter the monastery.¹⁷

Moreover, the ascetic Jonah does not require the usual human requirements for physical survival. “Human life is not sustainable without air, yet without air the carnal lives like the spiritual” (231). I doubt this can be literally practiced by the ascetic/monk, but Narsai expresses the reality that the ascetical life does not function physiologically for those who are dead to the world. There is no reference in the canonical tale about Jonah eating anything for the three days, and while he could have fasted under the circumstances, Narsai notes in passing that “The son of Mattai descended and dwelt in Sheol in the mystery of our Saviour, and the Sign (*remzā*) kept insects for him as food in the bowels of the fish” (283–284). That must have been spiritual food!

Narsai shifts to the typology of Jonah's three days with those three days to come of Christ, for Jonah's role is not perceived as coincidental.

¹⁷ R.A. Kitchen, *The Discourses of Philoxenos of Mabbug: A New Translation and Introduction* (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2013), 20 (*Mēmṛā* 2.2), 205–208 (*Mēmṛā* 9.3–5).

It was not his own (decision) to flee in order to hide and not to be sent,
for the great mystery of the One who was to come was first depicted in him. (233–234)

Jonah stumbled into his role through divine guidance, the *remzā* at work again,
and would not only become the type for Christ, “the Sign of Jonah,” but also the
type for the ascetical life of the Church.

Through the death of a person He was going to repudiate the power of death;
and so he buried Jonah *symbolically* (*rāzānā’it*) before the event. (239–240)

Something new was accomplished symbolically with the son of Mattai,
for when the fish swallowed his body it kept him alive.
But the fulfillment of the mystery of Jonah was also new,
for the body which covetous death had swallowed up was not destroyed. (249–250)

Narsai’s declaration is two-fold: first indeed for Christ, but second for the ascetic
in the church who is striving to be an *’ihidāyā* or follower of the *’ihidāyā*, that is,
of the Only Begotten. The ascetic who ventures to live outside the world can dis-
cover that he is not forsaken and destroyed but renewed and resurrected. Narsai
continues by saying that this story becomes a parable of the true authentic life.

But if one circumcised of the flesh and uncircumcised of the heart should speak,
“What is the meaning hidden in the mystery which Jonah has served?
What afflicted him that for three days he should be in the fish,
and *live a life estranged from the life of human beings?*” (257–260)

Solitude seems initially a punishment but eventually is a reward renewing one’s life.
Jonah prays to God and is heard and redeemed. Narsai drops a hint to his
audience as he describes the ascetical strictures placed on Jonah and perhaps
some others listening:

Certainly, the confined one’s (*hbušyā*) prayer took place in a tomb within a tomb,
and broke through the wall of the fish and water and into heaven. (307–308)

Jonah is the type not only of Christ but also of the monks/ascetics in the monas-
teries and churches.

The *remzā* returns to action and directs the fish to take Jonah back to the pre-
cise spot where he had been swallowed and there for the second time heard the
same words from the voice of revelation.

On account of this, I buried you while alive and I opened (the tomb) before you,
so that you might open the door before the strangers to enter to (see) me.
Through your resurrection I sought to resurrect the living buried ones;
look, I have taught you the salvation of your life: save those who are perishing.
Come now and preach redemption of life to those who have been dead for a long time,
and resurrect them by the living hope of repentance.
Cultivate the earth of the ear’s hearing of their minds,
and cast into it the good seed of the awesome (nature of) truth. (335–342)

The Ninevites are also the living dead and Jonah is called to preach them into resurrection. Jonah does preach, and the Ninevites, as he had feared, listen and respond in appropriate fashion. The King of Nineveh summons his people to repentance, an ascetical response which uniquely includes the non-human population.

Let our soul respond with the labor of fasting from enticements,
and let (our soul) inhibit the onset of licentiousness by means of chastity.
Let us restrict our mouths from food, nourishments for the body,
and let us inhibit our souls from the cultivation of greed.
May even the animals fast with us from nourishment. (391–395)

The Ninevites have become the new model or type for a proper ascetical life – or perhaps the monastic life – in the presence of God. Jonah understands this paradigm shift and chooses to die rather than accept its incongruity, and so “He left the city and went out to dwell in solitude (*iḥidāʾit*)” (425). Narsai is offering a double entendre: First, Jonah is going off by himself alone, away from the Ninevites, but second he is attempting to resume his ascetical profession so successfully achieved in the fish. And then there is the unpredictable plant that shades Jonah from the abnormal heat, and he finds pleasure in it until it withers and dies.

The *remzā* has a last, long word for Jonah:

The Sign whispered to him by a single message in his own language,
“Why are you sad about a silent thing that suddenly flourished?
Why are you bound up by perfect love with weak things,
and do not approach the glorious things which human beings possess?
Why do you love that which is not your own (nature)
and hate what is of your nature?” (459–463)

Jonah’s love of the gourd is self-centered and ignores the genius and salvation of other people. Asceticism affirms humanity, not rejects it. The story ends with a dangling participle – and many animals – concluding that Jonah is a failed ascetic.

The Liturgy in the Fiery Furnace

Narsai’s exegesis of Daniel 3 and the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace is no less dramatic and dynamic, and just as theologically poignant as that of Jonah.¹⁸ The lure and power of idolatry never seems to get old – this biblical story is not only familiar but still a current event.

¹⁸ Ed. Mingana 2.314–328.

The proem starts off more quickly than others, situating the listeners among the exiles in the Babylonian Empire, a people who while adapting to their strange new land, nevertheless did not forget the taste of the Promise (5–8). Narsai categorizes them as:

Wrestlers, competitors against enticements,
the clutches (of enticements) slip off their bodies.
The children of Abraham, the renowned friend whose love is true,
entered the contest and were victorious and departed like their father.
The victorious, children of the victorious one, entered the contest of passions,
and waited to fulfill that word which (was given) to Abram. (13–18)

Not only are these children of Abraham, the Three Young Men, keeping confidence in the Promise of Abram but also holding dear the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham as the model for their trial. Narsai does not really explain how the fire that Abraham was building to sacrifice Isaac and Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace were akin in a positive sense.

The upright Abraham did not question the death of his son,
and the children of Abram did not fear the death of their persons.
They imagined him taking up his son for the sacrifice
and gave their bodies to the flame so that they might imitate him. (23–26)

Narsai begins his exegesis with Nebuchadnezzar's revelatory vision of an idol that will make him great again. Narsai sees through this idol as a ploy to trap the Jewish population into submitting religiously to the king, further undermining their ethnic solidarity and assimilating them into the Babylonian nation. A Babylonian Idol Festival is declared in which everyone is required to worship this really big god, and thereby expose anyone without the right kind of loyalty. Narsai caricatures the plausibility of this idol and festival, and when it is all over, he observes that the local Babylonians were embarrassed that Nebuchadnezzar was so sadly deluded and foolish in erecting this idol.

But first, the command to worship is given, and all prostrate themselves to the idol except the three young Hebrew men. The anger of Nebuchadnezzar and his staff is greater because of the pre-story in which he had given them the best of training and food, grooming them to be government officials, and now they had spurned his generosity. They were successful, if you remember, because they had quietly circumvented the overly rich royal diet and had maintained an ascetical regime of diet and exercise (Daniel 1). The king and the Three exchange diatribes and refutations, notably the Three declare,

God forbid, may it not happen that we should bend our head before a silent thing,
and should call "god" something that is not god which deceit has constructed. (167–168).

Such deft theological statements resulted in the furnace being stoked seven-fold.

"The faithful went down into the furnace and stood up with tranquility" (203).

Narsai changes the Peshiṭta text, using the verb *nḥet(w)* “descend, go down” instead of the canonical *nṗal(w)* “fall down” as well as omitting that they were bound up but adding that after descending into the furnace they stood up. The change to an intentional verb of descent and then standing up implies a liturgical move of prostration and standing in prayer. The watcher/angel, the Fourth figure Nebuchadnezzar saw walking in the furnace, is already in the furnace, welcomes the Three, and then proceeds to negate the intensity of the furnace’s fire. Narsai personifies the flame which is frustrated by its inability to wreak its natural destruction and consequently recognizes the power of the divine rendering it harmless.

Then an act of worship breaks out and transforms the confined furnace into an eschatological space.

The furnace became a beautiful bridal chamber for those beautiful of soul,
and the watchers were waiting upon (them), fire before their faces.
As in a holy sanctuary the holy ones stood in prayer,
and brought there the pure offerings of their minds.
With great passions, the chaste prayed passionately,
and mournfully sought to pray for their salvation.
With the cry of “Holy” they paid back thanks to the One who have given them life,
and with discernment they composed the words of psalms. (267–274)

Worship is thus a form of asceticism seeking to transform the worshipers’ minds and bodies. Three times Narsai calls the Three “the chaste ones” (*naḵpē*), a term typically applied to monks, inferring those who have disciplined themselves to avoid the enticements of the passions.

The Three “holy ones” (*qaddiṣē*) then offer a short prayer, praising God in a series of five beatitudes, “Blessed is the One ...,” for having preserved them from the fire and moreover, thwarting the fire’s efforts to be a fire that burns and destroys (275–284).

Narsai’s reading of this story focuses more on how God and his *remzā* taught the Babylonians about the nature and power of the One True God, and to show the Nations how to recognize the Truth. The wrestlers engaged in this contest and drama needed to be accomplished ascetics in order to reverse the power of worldly arrogance and power.

Supplication, But Not Fasting

Narsai’s *Mēmṛā 13 ‘On Supplication and Fasting’* sounds like a logical place to find discussion of ascetical labours, in particular fasting (*ṣawmā*).¹⁹ Titles of early Christian treatises and homilies are not always that logical and consistent, so

¹⁹ Ed. Mingana I.117–133.

there is no mention of fasting except in the title. The *mēmṛā* does focus on supplication for forgiveness (*bā'utā*) but from a different perspective. Narsai writes about our human tendency towards sin and iniquitous behaviour, and how God recognizes our human frailties on a remarkably subtle, gracious, and merciful level. That does not relieve us from earnest supplication, but Narsai is both explaining in great detail our iniquitous bent and beseeching God to continue the merciful patterns of judgment and reconciliation already shown to us historically.

There are a few passages that imply the necessity of the ascetical labours. In the poem, Narsai utilizes the image of the contest (*'aḡonā*) in which humanity is seemingly eternally engaged.

Give us the power to be strong in the contest of labours.
We are thrust at all hours into the contest of the labours of the physical passions,
and there is no time when the battle of our lusts is silenced. (12–14)

Mercifully, your will travels with all who are wrestling. (165)

Adam Becker has written an article on the Syriac term *yaṣrā* “inclination, propensity, tendency, disposition” that is found frequently in Narsai.²⁰ There are ten occurrences of this term in this homily, and while Becker makes careful note that there are many instances where *yaṣrā* can be a positive inner force, here Narsai sees nothing but “the evil inclination (*yaṣrā biṣā*).” Without detouring into a separate topic, let me quickly outline what this *yaṣrā* entails and means for Narsai, and then a concluding question and suggestion.

In the second couplet, addressing God, Narsai writes,

O Good One who takes aim at the evilness of our inclination while not changing it,
perfect your kind will through the restitution of our life. (3–4)

What is characteristic of God’s perspective on our *yaṣrā* is that God notices but does not try to change this inclination; it is a fundamental part of the human fabric, a perception which Becker points out originated in the evil inclination (*yeṣer*) of the first humans before and after the Flood (Genesis 6:5–6 and 8:21). After the Flood, God promises “never again to curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.”

Addressing God, Narsai affirms that the Divinity has known this human tendency all along and has come to a manner of handling it.

... for you more than all are expert in the kind of our sinfulness.
You knew us before our foundation and after we came to be,
and you are expert in our evil inclination to which it is prone. (216–218)

Death and iniquity have closed the door of their deceits before us,
and look, they are plotting to sink us without resurrection.

²⁰ A. H. Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination’ of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatsra* in Narsai’s Metrical Homilies for Lent,” *JQR* 106 (2016): 179–207.

You are a path of resurrection, and the remission of debts,
and you have taught us that he eliminates death and silences iniquity.
In one of our race you have trodden the road of the renewal of our race,
allow us to travel to the beautiful meeting which is the renewal of our lives. (285–290)

Human beings know, Narsai continues, that their inclinations inhibit them from the possibility of authentic life and its rewards.

The kinds of virtues have died like someone dead without a shroud,
and their deeds are erring like one who is dead.
Dead are the virtues, and the types of foolish deeds are alive,
woe to us who have become dead to the truth and alive to iniquity.
We resurrect deadly iniquity through our iniquity,
and through our harshness we are killing the embryos of righteousness. (373–378)

There is still hope that through the lives of the saints humanity may learn and benefit.

Come, those who are perfected in their ways of life, as much as it is possible,
sprinkle your labours as forgiveness upon sinners. (459–460)

This manner of perfection is based heavily upon God's grace and mercy and not the accomplishments of the ascetics' labours.

Grace and mercy seasoned my mind with the medicine of words,
so that through words people may drink grace and mercy.
Through the drinking of words I have made pure the medicine of the remission of debts,
and I yearn that everyone may drink it and turn its iniquity away. (465–468)

This tells us a lot and not enough. There are many more metrical homilies of Narsai to examine and study, but I believe a suggestion is possible here: The control and management of our *yaṣrā bišā* by both human beings through the example of Christ, and by God through grace and mercy, is the basic principle underlying Narsai's ascetical strategy or *dubbārē*. Narsai does not indicate this directly in the homilies examined thus far, but here he hints that the fundamental obstacle of the human condition to be able to have a proper relationship with God – our evil inclination, our *yaṣrā* – is something we can still discipline with a dose of God's grace.

The Faculty of Discernment in Narsai

Craig E. Morrison

Narsai's biblical homilies on David and Saul (*Mēmṛā* 74), the Prophet Jonah (*Mēmṛā* 14), the Prodigal Son (*Mēmṛā* 33), and the Bronze Serpent (*Mēmṛā* 55) probe questions of human sin and wickedness, personal freedom, and the human faculty to choose between right and wrong. At the core of Narsai's investigation is the human ability to discern, *pārošutā* (ܦܪܫܘܬܐ). Narsai rereads particular biblical characters to illustrate how, due to a failure in their discernment, they turned to sin and then lived disordered lives. But through *pārošutā*, discernment, they were able to set their lives back on the right course, because, as Narsai writes, the person is a treasury of discernment.¹ In these *mēmṛē*, particular biblical accounts become stories of discernment lost and regained.

Pārošutā in the Bible and Early Jewish and Christian Literature

Discernment is a central feature of the spiritual, mystical, and ascetical life across religious writings.² In their conversation about discernment, Syriac authors considered how and when the human person received this unique faculty. Did Eve have this faculty when she encountered the talking serpent? Could she have resisted the serpent's suggestion (Genesis 3) before she ate from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Could she discern the serpent's deceit? These questions are as old as the Bible itself. The seventeenth-century author Edward Cooke's *Bartas Junior* (1631) argued that Adam and Eve knew good and evil before the fall. But after eating the forbidden fruit, they acquired the knowledge of the *guilt* of evil by the *loss* of good.³ More recently, Bernard Levinson notes that when Eve responds to the serpent, "she has already begun to reflect

¹ *Mēmṛā* 24 'On Lent IV' (ed. Mingana 1.195.13–14): ܦܪܫܘܬܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ.

² Lienhard rightly notes that the term discernment is "a biblical term and has a long and somewhat complex history" (J. Lienhard, "On 'Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church," *TS* 41 [1980]: 505). See also B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*, vol. 1. *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 137 and W. Spohn, "The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment," *TS* 44 (1983): 30–52.

³ P. Almond, *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 194.

upon the conditions of her life, her relation to God, her relation to Adam, and her freedom of choice.”⁴ Then he asks the question that lingers in the biblical text: “How could Adam properly understand the instruction in any meaningful way as a command if he had no knowledge, the very thing from which he is to abstain? Absent the forbidden fruit of knowledge, Adam could not distinguish between the instruction as a command requiring his obedience and the instruction as merely describing an inevitable law of nature.”⁵ These questions were on the minds of ancient Jewish writers as well. Targum Neofiti expands on Gn 3:5 so that the reader learns that the faculty of discernment comes from eating of the tree:

Masoretic Text 3:5

והייתם כאלהים ידעי טוב ורע:

You will become like gods, knowing good and evil

Targum Neofiti 3:5

ותהון במלאכין מן קדם יי ידעין למפרשה בין טב לביש

You will become like angels before the Lord, knowing how to discern between good and evil.

The Targum adds the key word למפרשה, “to discern,” here and again in Gn 3:22 so that the reader of the Palestinian Targums learns that from Adam will come forth one nation endowed with discernment:⁶

Targum Neofiti Gn 3:22

ומנה תקום אומ[ה] חדא דידעה למפרשה בין טב לביש

... from him will arise one nation that will know how to discern between good and bad.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gn 3:22

ועתידין למיקום מיניה דידעין למפרשא בין טב לביש

... from him are destined to arise those who will know how to discern between good and bad.

These minor expansions in the Targum illustrate the importance of the question of the emergence of human discernment for early Jewish writers. The person not only “knows” good and bad but, the Targum insists, can also “discern” (מפרשא) between the two.

But if Adam and Eve acquired discernment only after eating from the tree, how could they have recognized the wily machinations of the serpent? How can

⁴ B. M. Levinson, *Right Chorale: Studies in Biblical Law and Interpretation* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 43.

⁵ Levinson, *Right Chorale*, 44.

⁶ Targum Onkelos does not add the word “discernment” in Gn 3:22: ואמר יי אלהים הא אדם הוה יחידי בעלמא מנה למידע טב וביש “The Lord God said, ‘See, Adam has become unique in the world, knowing by himself good and bad.’”

Peshitta

אחרי מלחמת העולם הראשונה, חזרה חצי האי אלמא לאזור חקלאי, ונבנו בו מספר כפרים, ובהם ח'רבת אלמא.

Aphrahat (Dem. 17, § 7)

[illegible]

In Aphrahat's imagination Adam and Eve were able to resist the serpent's temptation because they were created with the faculty of discernment. Therefore they are responsible for succumbing to the serpent's suggestion. Ephrem, in his *Commentary on Genesis* (Section II § 20), imagines how Eve should have responded to the serpent and suggests that she too had the faculty of discernment before she ate from the tree, but she abandoned this faculty as she listened to the serpent's manipulations.

સા.ક.મ. દા.ત. ૨૦૨૦-૨૧

Ephrem sees the question of Eve's ability to discern before the fall and imagines Eve's thought process as she engages the serpent:

אָס וואָס איז אַ פּאַרטיקלע פֿון דער גאנצער וועלט.

Then Eve decides that the very presence of the serpent indicates that she can discern:

കുറിപ്പ്

Your arrival to us is a witness that we have these things.

⁷ Ed. J. Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes* (PS 1.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), 799–800.

As the homily opens David is victorious in all that he does. But when the devil comes on stage, David is unable to think correctly; he fails to discern. Narsai probes deeply into the machinations of David's mind that result in Uriah's murder. He observes closely how the devil disturbed (ḡḡḡ) David's discernment. David's writing became so disordered that he began to write backwards, from *Taw* to *Aleph* instead of from *Aleph* to *Taw*. This metaphor of reversed writing would be a grave ill for a rational creature (ḡḡḡ) – the very reversal of the creation of the person. Narsai interrogates David for his self-deception:

Finally, David acknowledges that God has scrutinized his heart:

But Narsai reserves the term *pāroṣuṭā* until his homily on David and Saul comes to a climax, just after he retells the prophet Nathan's biblical parable to David. He expands on Nathan's demand that David pronounce a royal decision on the stolen ewe lamb – the phony legal case that Nathan has invented. Nathan demands that David employ his faculty of discernment:

தலைநகரம் திருச்சி

David's lack of self-knowledge and his failure to discern, which has resulted in his crimes, now reaches a critical point:

¹⁴ Frishman, "Narsai's Homily for the Palm Festival," 182.

¹⁵ Reading  from ms. Vat. Syr. 594. The Patriarchal Press Edition reads .

¹⁶ *Mēmra* 74 'On David and Saul', 383–386 (ed. Patriarchal Press 789.4–7).

¹⁷ *Mēmra* 74 'On David and Saul', 407 (ed. Patriarchal Press 790.4).

¹⁸ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 351 (ed. Patriarchal Press 787.20).

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He unknowingly brought the just judgment down upon himself:
“As the Lord lives the one who did this is guilty of death.”¹⁹

Later in the homily, Narsai argues that it was “iniquity” that blinded David from proper discernment:

ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ
ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ

Iniquity blinded me from discerning judgment;
I did not reflect as I walked a fraudulent path.²⁰

But once David has been forgiven for his crimes against Bathsheba and Uriah, his faculty of discernment returns:

ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ
ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ ܕܝܠܐ

The creator realized that (David’s) inclination wanted to preach through him,
so he gave him back the power to penetrate into future events.²¹

Discernment, which involves self-awareness, self-possession, and self-consciousness, is lost through a surrender to iniquity and is then reacquired when the protagonist enters into a trial, fails at that trial, confesses his sin, endures a period of suffering, and then reacquires his faculty of discernment.

The Prodigal Son (*Mēmṛā* 33)

The parable of the prodigal son is an obvious choice for Narsai to develop his theme of lost and reacquired *pārošutā*, since *pārošutā* is an essential theme in the parable itself. The turning point comes when the son “comes to himself” (Luke 15:17: εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν; ܡܡܪܐ ܕܐܠ ܪܕܝܐ) and reacquires his faculty of discernment. Once that has happened, the biblical parable describes at length the impact that reacquired discernment has on the son. From a narratological perspective, the brief remark from the narrator, “he came to himself,” is a supplementary detail that reveals the central meaning of the parable. Thus, it comes as no surprise that of the one hundred times that Narsai employs the term *pārošutā* in his homilies, six of them appear in the homily on the Prodigal Son.

Narsai dedicates some twenty-five lines to the meaning of the three Syriac words from the parable, “he came to himself” (ܡܡܪܐ ܕܐܠ ܪܕܝܐ), before he allows

¹⁹ *Mēmṛā* 74 ‘On David and Saul’, 359–360 (ed. Patriarchal Press 788.4–5).

²⁰ *Mēmṛā* 74 ‘On David and Saul’, 419–420 (ed. Patriarchal Press 790.16–17).

²¹ *Mēmṛā* 74 ‘On David and Saul’, 500–501 (ed. Patriarchal Press 794.2–3).

the prodigal son to speak.²² This moment of self-reflection in the parable becomes a thorn pricking the prodigal son's *pārošutā*:

ܬܬܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ
ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ
ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ
ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ

He (the prodigal son) was immersed and left mute in the harsh pain that remained with him, until nature called to him in silence and spoke with him.

Like a prod, nature pricked his discernment.

He was startled from deep sleep and he saw himself detested in iniquity.²³

The awakening of his faculty of discernment is the beginning of his transformation. Narsai imagines the prodigal son's internal self-examination:

ܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ
ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ

He said to himself, "Where are you, O inclination, that is the discerner within me."

"Where are you, my mind that possesses the wisdom of discernment."²⁴

As Narsai imagines the prodigal son's internal dialogue, he employs the key terms in his anthropology: "Where are you, O my conscience (*re'yān[y]*)...? Where are you, O mind (*hawnā*)...? Where are you, O soul (*naṣṣā*)...?" Whereas Narsai argues that iniquity blocked David's discernment, in this parable, it was "ignorance" (*lā iḏa'tā*; lines 177–84 and 255) that perverted the prodigal son's discernment:

ܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ

I am here wasting away from hunger for ignorance²⁵

At the end of the parable, Narsai teaches his audience that through *pārošutā* the prodigal son came to recognize his sin.

ܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ
ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܝܢ

By convincing words he numbered himself among the hired hands.

It is discernment that judges itself for the sins it commits.²⁶

In this *mēm̄rā* Narsai also appeals briefly to a theme that will appear in the *mēm̄rē* on Jonah and on the Bronze Serpent: As the younger son squanders his inheritance, the son's discernment is likened to that of animals:

²² *Mēm̄rā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 156–180 (ed. Siman 29–30).

²³ *Mēm̄rā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 149–152 (ed. Siman 27.23–27).

²⁴ *Mēm̄rā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 156–157 (ed. Siman 29.4–5).

²⁵ *Mēm̄rā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 184 (ed. Siman 30.6).

²⁶ *Mēm̄rā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 315–316 (ed. Siman 35.7–8).

ܡܠܟܐ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܕܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ
ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ

The hateful one who hired him made his life equivalent to that of animals and bound the manner of his discernment to mute animals.²⁷

In both the David and Saul homily and the Prodigal Son homily, the term *pārošutā* appears at the turning point in Narsai's recasting of these stories. Like David, the prodigal son fails to discern, suffers the consequences, and then re-discovers his faculty of discernment and recognizes his folly.

Jonah (*Mēmṛā* 14)

The prophet Jonah, who also loses and regains his faculty of discernment, was another obvious choice for Narsai to illustrate his anthropology. For the first 200 lines of this *mēmṛā*, Narsai remains close to the biblical story.²⁸ But when the fish appears, Narsai introduces the contrast between the mute one, the fish, and Jonah who is endowed with speech:

ܡܠܟܐ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ
ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ

The fugitive fell into the watery snares and the waves bound him, while mute creatures were silently adjudicating his discernment.²⁹

Narsai employs sharp irony to explore lost and regained *pārošutā*: the mute (*ḥaršā*) fish judges the rational (*mlilā*) Jonah's discernment.

When Jonah accepts the divine commandment, his faculty of discernment returns:

ܡܠܟܐ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ
ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ
ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ
ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ ܡܬܪܥܝܢ

He (God) taught him the way of the nations though he did not want (to learn it).
He taught him that it was fitting for him to love the nations.
The Son of Abraham acquired the understanding of discernment,
for he called to the nations in the nature of the house of Abraham.³⁰

Then, as the homily draws to a close, the Ninevites too, like the prodigal son, come to discern their sin:

²⁷ *Mēmṛā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 57–58 (ed. Siman 25.9–10).

²⁸ *Mēmṛā* 14 'On Jonah', 1–200 (ed. Mingana 1.134–140).

²⁹ *Mēmṛā* 14 'On Jonah', 209–210 (ed. Mingana 1.140).

³⁰ *Mēmṛā* 14 'On Jonah', 345–348 (ed. Mingana 1.144.18–20).

ܐܬܬܝܕ ܐܝܡܐ ܕܢܝܥܡܐ ܕܠܐ ܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ

He (God) made them hate iniquity, though they were not willing.
He requited them with his mercy for the discernment of the soul's remorse.³¹

The Bronze Serpent (*Mēmṛā* 55)

The Prodigal Son, when he lacks discernment, is likened to a mute animal, and Jonah learns discernment from a fish. Narsai develops this theme when he refashions the account of the Israelite complaint against God in Numbers 21:4–9 into a story about discernment.³² The serpents sent by God to torment the Israelites are undiscerning ones or mute ones, who are not endowed with speech. The mute creatures punish the persons who failed to discern God's design for the Israelites. Narsai imagines the serpent addressing the Israelites:

ܣܠܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ

The power that created me hindered me from harming your discernment.
Because you did not discern him (God), he set me loose so that I might straighten out your ignorance.³³

Narsai repeatedly draws out the irony of the mute, undiscerning one, the bronze serpent, teaching the rational person discernment.

ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ
ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ ܕܥܬܝܐ

The mute ones exacted the satisfaction for the iniquity from those who are endowed with speech.

They silenced them from blaspheming against the creator.

The creator taught the undiscerning (serpents)

to exact the vengeance of his dishonor from the discerning ones.

The undiscerning ones were discerning intensely in order to discern carefully.

Perhaps those possessing language were not discerning as they should.³⁴

³¹ *Mēmṛā* 14 'On Jonah', 401–402 (ed. Mingana 1.146.8–9).

³² *Mēmṛā* 33 'On the Prodigal Son', 156–180 (ed. Siman 29–30).

³³ *Mēmṛā* 55 'On the Bronze Serpent', 71–72 (ed. Frishman 105).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā* 55 'On the Bronze Serpent', 79–84 (ed. Frishman 105).

Discernment in Other Homilies

What Narsai's biblical homilies illustrate through story, the theological homilies teach explicitly. Because humanity gained the faculty of discernment from the tree of knowledge, in the final judgement, humanity will be judged by the glorified Christ on how they used this faculty:

ܬܝܚܝܬ ܬܬܝܬܝܬ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ
ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ

In his judgment he (Christ) scrutinizes (the person's) rational faculty of discernment and he brings into the open deeds, words and the wink of an eye.³⁸

Narsai's eschatology in these lines is concretely illustrated in the lives of David, Jonah, and the Prodigal Son. The person is saved by discernment:

ܬܝܚܝܬ ܬܬܝܬܝܬ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ
ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ

The person acquires the freedom of the soul through his likeness (to an angel). The person is able to sin but also can be justified as a discerner.³⁹

The ability to discern preserves the person from wickedness as Jonah, the Prodigal Son, and David illustrate for Narsai's audience.

Everyone Should Be a "Discerner"

The purpose of Narsai's argument is to sharpen his listeners' capacity to discern. At the beginning of the homily on David and Saul, Narsai calls his audience "discerners":

ܡܡ ܬܬܝܬܝܬ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ
ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ

From things that are mute he (David) taught eloquence:
"Gaze O discerning ones into the silent course and give praise!"⁴⁰

So it is the task of the discerning person to give voice to the silent movements of creation. Then, at the end of this homily, he invites his listeners to become "discerners":

ܐܝܬܝܬ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܢܐ

Come O discerning ones! See the voyeur who fixed his gaze and became blind.⁴¹

³⁸ *Mēmṛā* 45 'Homily on the Ascension', 215–216 (ed. McLeod 174).

³⁹ *Mēmṛā* 65 'On Creation VI', 247–248 (ed. Gignoux 268).

⁴⁰ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 87–88 (ed. Patriarchal Press 776.20–21).

⁴¹ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 538 (ed. Patriarchal Press 795.14).

Also in the homily on Jonah, Narsai invites his audience to discern carefully the meaning of the Jonah story:

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ
ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ

Read and consider discerningly the spiritual books.

See, you will learn that the mysteries are fulfilled in the hopes of the peoples.⁴²

At the beginning of *Mēmṛā* 17 ‘*For Any Saint’s Day*’, he addresses his audience as “discerners”:

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ
ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ

Hear, O discerning ones, that there is a world without corruption.

Reject this temporal world whose course comes to an end.⁴³

At the end of *Mēmṛā* 36 ‘*On the Passion*’, again he calls his audience discerners:

ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ ܕܥܡܪܐ

Come, my brothers, let us scrutinize, like discerners, truth from deceit.⁴⁴

In Narsai’s world, everyone is exhorted to become discerners.

Conclusion

This brief article cannot do justice to the depth of meaning that the word *pārošutā* has for Narsai’s understanding of the person. My hope is that this study will alert readers to its importance when they encounter it in Narsai’s *mēmṛē*. Human history reveals the impact of that legendary day when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a transgression that, according to Narsai, set in motion humanity’s faculty of discernment. Narsai exploits various biblical stories as vehicles for understanding the role of human discernment. Through their *pārošutā*, King David, the prodigal son, the prophet Jonah, and the ancient Israelites bitten by serpents came to know themselves and God better. Their failure to discern resulted in their own suffering and the suffering of others. But later they reacquired their ability to discern God’s divine design in human history and in their own lives. Narsai wants his audience to do the same. His listeners should employ their faculty of discernment that distinguishes them from all other created things because when people fail to discern, they act like mute animals or worse, like inanimate objects.

⁴² *Mēmṛā* 14 ‘*On Jonah*’, 273–274 (ed. Patriarchal Press 142.12–13).

⁴³ *Mēmṛā* 17 ‘*For Any Saint’s Day*’ (ms. Vat. Syr. 588, f. 61r.5).

⁴⁴ *Mēmṛā* 36 ‘*On the Passion*’, 774 (ed. McLeod 132).

The writings of twentieth-century mystics, such as Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi,⁴⁵ remind us that *pāroṣuṭā* is a critical human capacity and when humanity fails to discern, millions of people suffer and die unjustly – modern day “Uriahs.” Arendt in her major opus, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* describes her pre-World-War-II German society of eighty million people “that had been shielded against reality and factuality by ... the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann’s mentality ... But the practice of self-deception had become so common, almost a moral prerequisite for survival.”⁴⁶ On a much smaller scale, David, Jonah, and the prodigal son practiced similar self-deception before recovering their *pāroṣuṭā*. Hannah Arendt’s insights translate into our own day the exhortation of the poet Narsai, who centuries ago challenged his audience to live discerning lives.

⁴⁵ Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore S.p.A., 1958).

⁴⁶ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 52.

Extraordinary Conceptions

Insemination and Theories of Reproduction in Narsai's Thought

Ellen Muehlberger

In the last decade, an intriguing new perspective has developed in research into Late Antiquity. In addition to investigating *what* late ancient people knew in various subjects, scholars have turned to also investigate *how* what was known by late ancient people. That is to say, new scholarly work has turned to consider both the creation of knowledge and its distribution; it aims to understand the social, political, and even economic conditions that make knowing a given set of facts or traditions possible, as well as to investigate how such knowledge was secured and transmitted. This turn to epistemology has been interdisciplinary, not solely because it is a promising development in research. Rather, its questions are being asked by scholars across many fields – ancient religion, ancient medicine, late ancient history, classical studies, and philology more generally – because to ask about the architecture of knowledge in Late Antiquity is to be forced to cross the boundaries that would separate us. At knowledge's edge, new ideas and new concepts were expressed in terms not easily slotted into one discipline or another.¹ In order to grasp the totality of what a given late ancient writer knows and how he knows it, a scholar might need to be ready to incorporate into her research a text that otherwise she might pass by, or to adopt as a context a field other than the one she might instinctively assign to the writer's work. Thus, research that begins by holding the traditional disciplinary categorizations to the side can be fruitful, especially when its aim is to grasp how or where novel ideas emerged. In the consideration of late ancient knowledge, our disciplinary classifications, traditional though they are, can obscure more than they reveal.

The research being done at the border which might otherwise distinguish early Christian thought about humanity from the medical discourses of contemporary Late Antiquity is an excellent example of the power of such an approach to late ancient knowledge.² Elsewhere, I have argued that early Christian ideas about

¹ C. M. Chin and M. Vidas, *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) is an exemplary collection of this kind of scholarship.

² At the center of this example is the scholarly working group titled ReMeDHe – Religion,

humanity, traditionally gathered under the label “theological anthropology,” can be profitably explored in concert with the concepts of humanity advanced by late ancient medical theories, for multiple reasons.³ Obviously, late ancient Christian writers, intellectual elite men, had some general knowledge about contemporary medical theories, so it would be a mistake to attempt to isolate a model of Christian thinking about the human being that somehow remained uninflected by the late ancient knowledge represented in medical texts. Beyond just being generally knowledgeable about medical discourses of the time, though, Christian writers were also traveling along the same heading as medical writers. The two types were asking a common set of questions about humanity, if we think of those questions in a general sense: Both were invested in determining humanity’s nature, often by thinking on its origins; both wanted to fully understand humanity’s flaws and hoped to develop the skill to diagnose specific out-workings of those flaws, often from scant or hinty evidence.

Put another way, both ancient Christian thought about humanity and late ancient medicine are ameliorative systems. The path to improving humanity’s condition is parallel in each case, in that both systems aim to develop knowledge about what has gone wrong and to disseminate knowledge of the method of repair. They share more than just their aims. There is also a peculiar array of methods for developing and disseminating such knowledge which is common to Christian thought and medicine: Both discourses are deeply committed to continuity within their tradition – ancient medical writers are as respectful of the forebears they revere as ancient Christian theologians are of theirs – and yet both also very clearly innovate. They frequently couch their innovations, however, in traditionalist, even anti-innovationist, terms. Historians of ancient medicine have put a name to the conservative impulse underlying ancient writers’ tendency to express their insights, derivative or not, as derivations of the knowledge already expressed by the authorities of the past. They speak of the “doxographical” inclination in medical writing, but the term could just as easily be a label for ancient Christian writing as well.⁴ Practically speaking, for us as readers, this means we must be prepared to recognize in our sources innovations in thought even when, and especially when, their authors present them as recapitulations of the work of or themes treated by earlier authorities.

The writings surviving from Narsai are ripe for a new reading guided by these observations. Narsai has long had a reputation for being overly dependent on

Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity. The ReMedHe working group, and its website, are a wealth of resources for this kind of study (www.remedhe.com).

³ E. Muehlberger, “Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research,” *SP* 81 (2017): 37–49.

⁴ For a sampling of scholarship on this impulse in ancient medical writing, see P.J. Eijk, *Ancient Histories of Medicine: Essays in Medical Doxography and Historiography in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

the ideas of earlier Christian authors whom he revered, like John Chrysostom or Theodore of Mopsuestia. That reputation has too often invited readers to skip over his surviving writings. Yet this volume and this article share a conviction that Narsai is worth studying in his own right, as his writings both register what was known in Syriac Christianity in the fifth century but also can demonstrate Narsai's own creative thought on various fronts, if they are read in ways aptly designed to reveal his originality. For my part, I will examine three locations in his writing where a powerful agent transforms a passive entity, making it capable of extraordinary actions. These are two events of the past – when Gabriel the angel approached Mary to inform her of her motherhood, and when Satan approached Eve to tempt and deceive her – and one recurring event of the present, when a priest approaches the waters of baptism. As he discusses each moment, Narsai works with well-established themes given expression in other authors, so it can be easy to discern what is new in his thought. Narsai understands all three moments as inseminations, in which the potent seed of virile beings changes the generative potential of a silent substrate. Though the reproductive valences of his language have led some to classify these elements as poetic, or symbolic, thus not having the weight of a claim to knowledge, here I will demonstrate that the three together are markers of a coherent theory, which extends into other aspects of Narsai's thought. At the end of the article, I will reflect on why scholars have dismissed or overlooked Narsai's theories about transformative insemination and muse on what might be gained, more generally, by reading Syriac literature with the approach I take here.

We will begin, as I said, with the encounter between Mary and Gabriel first recounted in the Gospel of Luke. In the passage, the young woman Mary learns that she is to conceive and bear the child who will be Jesus when an angel, Gabriel, visits her to inform her. She is at first incredulous but then accepts the news with gratitude (Luke 1:26–38). Christian writers in antiquity were fascinated by the story, returning again and again to comment on the implications of the details of their conversation, whether for Mary's status, the role of the angel, or the place of the Holy Spirit, whom Gabriel informs Mary will be the agent in her conception of a child. In addition to what information could be drawn from the words spoken or the attitudes struck by Mary and Gabriel in the scene, it seems that commentators also were interested in the very fact that there was a conversation between an angel and human woman.⁵ As much is immediately evident from how frequently the conversation itself was replayed, adjusted, extended, or annotated by later commentators; it is as if, once the reality of Mary and Gabriel's conversation was established, writers were inspired to add more to it, to imagine it longer and more ramified than what had been reported in the Gospel of Luke.

⁵ For more on the implications of human-angel interaction, see my "Angel," in Chin and Vidas, *Late Ancient Knowing*, 117–132.

At the same time, the extensions of Gabriel and Mary's conversation fit with a wider trend in late ancient Christian readings of the Bible, as early Christian authors frequently composed extended speeches for biblical characters, inventing new comments to express what those characters might have been feeling or thinking.⁶ In Syriac literature, female characters especially were given voice this way.⁷ Playing with the forms of speech, we should understand, was its own kind of interpretation, especially because the speech added by commentators often comprises direct explanations of the scenes the characters inhabited, or their roles with respect to each other. In this way, the additional monologues and dialogues inspired by biblical scenes grant access to the assumptions and knowledge held by later interpreters of the story. Through the imaginative ways they extended biblical speech, we get to see these commentators as readers, to fathom what and how they know about the scenes they are reading by what they do with the stories and the characters they handle.

Syriac writers in Late Antiquity expanded the conversation between Mary and Gabriel in many directions, offering novel dialogue spoken between the two and new ways of framing the fact of their meeting. Their conversation is recharacterized in places, for instance, as a negotiation to lower or cancel a debt owed by humanity, or as Gabriel delivering to Mary a letter written by God, rather than speaking to her.⁸ Another frequent representation is to imagine Mary and Gabriel's conversation, and the topic of their conversation – her conception of a child – in agricultural terms.⁹ An anonymous metered text in Syriac, which can be dated to the fifth or sixth century, is an excellent example of how late ancient authors typically explored this theme. Its author explains that Gabriel approached Mary as a farmer might approach a field. As he opened their conversation, the author wrote, Gabriel “filled his mouth with greeting, then sowed it in her ears so

⁶ See, for example, S. A. Harvey, “Guiding Grief: Liturgical Poetry and Ritual Lamentation in Early Byzantium,” in M. Alexiou and D. Cairns (eds.), *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 199–216; T. Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); E. Muehlberger, “Affecting Rhetoric: The Adoption of Ethopoeia in Evagrius of Pontus’ Ascetic Program,” in S. Rubenson and L. Larsen (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 182–194; L. S. Lieber, “The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry,” *JR* 90 (2010): 119–147; eadem, “Stages of Grief: Enacting Lamentation in Late Ancient Hymnography,” *AJS Review* 40 (2016): 101–124; eadem, “On the Road with the Mater Dolorosa,” *J ECS* 24 (2016): 265–291.

⁷ S. A. Harvey, “2000 NAPS Presidential Address: Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 105–131.

⁸ Anonymous Hymns 3 and 4 in the appendix to T. J. Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, vol. 3 (Mechilinia: Dessain, 1889), 969–973 and 973–979, respectively.

⁹ N. Constas (*Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations* [Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae; Leiden: Brill, 2003], 274–313) treats the history of this theme in interpretation, but see also the discussion in Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song*, 72–75.

that she would flourish.”¹⁰ We might imagine this comment to be the anonymous author’s way of understanding the exchange that took place between Gabriel and Mary. (As we will see, it is possible for an author to take Gabriel’s words as the agent that accomplished Mary’s conception.) Yet in this poem, Gabriel’s greeting “sows” only in a literary sense. The author of the poem goes on to explain how Mary would come to conceive by the Holy Spirit, voicing his exposition in Gabriel’s words. In the poem, Mary wonders how she might become pregnant without intercourse, and Gabriel explains that God will sow the child in her like a farmhand. “Your ploughman,” he writes, “does not lack seed. He will descend and sow himself in your womb The Holy Spirit is coming to your inner part; it will brood and sanctify it. The power of the most high will descend and cover you, and a child will issue from you.”¹¹ Despite the earlier depiction of Gabriel’s greeting to Mary as a sowing, the insemination that accomplishes Mary’s conception is that of the Holy Spirit and not the words of the angel. While judging the ontological import of any one line of an ancient text can be tricky, in the presence of a later, more extensive explanation of Mary’s conception, we can take the author’s initial words about Gabriel sowing in her ears as an expression.

The trope of Gabriel’s seed entering Mary’s ears, an expression in this anonymous poem, became something weightier in Narsai’s treatment of the same encounter. In a homily about Jesus’ nativity, Narsai expounds on what happened when Gabriel and Mary met. He summarizes their encounter this way:

Gabriel sowed new tidings in Mary’s ears – a new conception, not in the method of human seed.

The pure virgin bore the fruit that his voice had sown.
The spirit sounded the canticle on the lyre of her soul;
She returned a song of thanks for this new conception:
“Blessed be the one who formed a dwelling place in my limbs for his love;
The one who made the entirety is worthy of praise from all mouths,
Because he deigned to elevate Adam’s dust by my humility.”
At the first month, Gabriel sowed conception in her ears,
And a spike of the bread of life sprouted in the ninth.
In Nisan, he grafted the vital force onto the vine of her body,
And she bore the cluster that gladdens the entirety in First Kanun.¹²

Narsai’s purpose here is to explain how their meeting led to Mary’s conception, and though he uses several poetic locutions – Mary’s child-to-be is a spike of grain or a cluster of grapes – the basic answer is that an angel sowed this “conception in her ears.” Throughout the following few sentences, no other agent is introduced by which “the vital force” could be grafted onto Mary, or whose voice set in motion the sowing; a spirit appears to sound a song in Mary’s soul, and it

¹⁰ Anonymous Hymn 5.8 of the appendix to Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri*, 981.

¹¹ Anonymous Hymn 5.15, 17 of the appendix to Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri*, 983.

¹² Narsai, *Mēmra* 4 ‘On the Nativity’, 189–200 (ed. McLeod 48–50).

could be a reference to the Holy Spirit, though conspicuously, it is not involved in any of the generation described in the poem. In this passage, as elsewhere in Narsai's writings, an angel's speech acts to render something capable of a greater potential than it had before encountering the angel.¹³

Narsai's notion of this interaction – a conception that happens when Gabriel inseminates Mary – is part of a wider theory he holds of insemination by non-human actors. That theory extends into the antediluvian past remembered by Christians about the origins of humanity. Frequently, Christian writers paired Christ with Adam, thinking on how one of them inaugurated trouble in humanity while the other solved it. Less frequently, a similar link was made between Mary and Eve: Eve was the conduit by which difficulty entered humanity, while Mary was its exit.¹⁴ Narsai participates in this trope as he links Mary, the vehicle for the ultimate correction of humanity, to Eve, whose life and especially disobedience brought error to humanity in the first place. Later in the same homily on the Nativity, Narsai describes the women in their parallel positions: "In Mary, he made void that pronouncement for Eve's ears: There was death, but here was life that would vivify the entirety. The tyrant sowed the bile of death in Eve's ears, while the watcher proclaimed in Mary's a song of thanks."¹⁵ It is possible to read Narsai's assertions here as another instance in a long tradition of typological reading in Christianity, by which a text's difficult or strange claims are rendered acceptable and coherent with wider assumptions held by a community of readers. Typological interpretations help to make texts make sense within certain traditions.

If we read widely in late ancient literature, though, there is a context in which Narsai's presentation of these two events already makes sense, not solely as a type and its later recapitulation, but as two pivots in the real condition of human beings. That context is, in a word, medical. It is the knowledge to be had about the human body that exists on the border between theology and medicine. We should turn to that knowledge because, when Narsai offers a theory about the process that happened to Mary and to Eve to bring about their respective changes in status, the process he discusses resides in their physical bodies. Notice the language he uses to contrast actions taken upon the two women in the following passage, also from the homily on the Nativity: "The watcher said 'peace' to Mary at the start of his words to dissolve the bonds of that pronouncement of judgment. He mingled peace with grace and gave it to the pure one to wash away

¹³ Compare his *Mēmṛā* 40 'On the Resurrection', 200 (ed. McLeod 148), where angels change the status of human beings who are waiting for the resurrection by also sowing words in their ears.

¹⁴ For a longer discussion of how late ancient and Byzantine authors took Eve's actions and its effects, see Constanas, *Proclus of Constantinople*, 282–290.

¹⁵ Narsai, *Mēmṛā* 4 'On the Nativity', 463–466 (ed. McLeod 66).

the bile that the evil one had sown in Eve's ears."¹⁶ Two substances are at work. The first, *merrtā* in Syriac, was issued by Satan into Eve's ears. I have translated it here as bile, but the word can represent an entire range of organic liquids that are manufactured by the body and are either excreted outside of it or flow inside of it: Phlegm, venom, gall, and the various humors have been referred to as *merrtā*.¹⁷ There is only one organic substance produced by human beings that is normally referred to as "seed" or something that is "sown," so perhaps "bile" is not the most accurate translation. The potential meaning of *merrtā* is clearer when taken in contrast to the other substance at work, the "mingled" compound that the angel prepared in order to sow it in Mary's ears. It is there to counteract the first substance; the "bile" of the evil one remains in Eve's ears, and the ears of all women down to Mary, until the angel is able to clear that substance so that he might admit his own seed and by it effect Mary's special conception. Here we are seeing Narsai explain that for Mary's extraordinary conception to happen, one organic substance needs to be cleared away so that the new seed can have a path by which to enter. It is not a stretch, then, for us to turn to the wide library of gynecological treatises from Late Antiquity, which offer a range of recipes and treatments to be prepared in order to clear a womb for conception, for the context of Narsai's description.¹⁸

Once we acknowledge that Narsai may have been offering a theory about how human conditions changed in these two moments when Eve and Mary received seed, we can also observe the peculiar and ambivalent status that he grants the two women. On the one hand, they have bodies that work in a special way. Namely, the effects that happen to them distribute to the rest of humanity by extension. Only four human beings have this status – two women, Eve and Mary, and two men, Adam and Christ – yet it is crucial that they do, in order to secure the changes in humanity's fate that Narsai, and more generally late ancient Christian theologians, assumed took place over the course of human existence.¹⁹ On

¹⁶ Narsai, *Mēmra* 4 'On the Nativity', 107–110 (ed. McLeod 44).

¹⁷ In addition to Syriac lexica, we could also look at the use of cognates of this word in rabbinic texts. The Talmud includes a story of the angel of death, who claims the dying human being by allowing a drop of *marrāh* to fall from his drawn sword into the reclining human being's mouth (b. Avodah Zarah 20b).

¹⁸ On the recipes available to cleanse and to prepare a uterus for conception, including those in the fourth-century manual called *The Michigan Medical Codex* (P. Mich. XVII), see A. E. Hanson, "Talking Recipes in the Gynaecological Texts of the *Hippocratic Corpus*," in M. Wykes (ed.), *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 71–94. On how to make a uterus receptive to generative seed, see A. E. Hanson, "Hippocrates: Diseases of Women 1," *Signs* 1 (1975): 567–584. On the washing, irrigation, and fumigation that a recalcitrant uterus requires, see R. Flemming, "The Invention of Infertility in the Classical Greek World: Medicine, Divinity, and Gender," *BHM* 87 (2013): 565–590. I am grateful to my colleague Anna Bonnell-Freidin for pointing me in the direction of these resources.

¹⁹ On Adam's strange gender in Christian interpretation, see G. Clark, "Adam's Womb (Augustine, *Confessions* 13.28) and the Salty Sea," included in *Body and Gender, Soul and Reason in Late Antiquity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 89–105.

the other hand, when Narsai explains the extraordinary conversions that happen to humanity through Eve and Mary, these women are very clearly *not* the agents who accomplish these changes. They are silent, receptive, and subjected to what is inserted into them. In this, Narsai's thought aligns closely with how medical literature of the time approached women; it also renders them less than the other two human beings whose actions changed the nature of humanity, Adam and Christ. Their status is thus complex: both extraordinary, in their capacities to influence the nature of all human bodies, and entirely passive, important as they act as the substrate from which others, by their seed, form novel realities.

My inclination to call this matrix of thought a coherent theory of insemination comes from the fact that Narsai's writings identify a third passive entity that begins to distribute a new state to humanity when it, too, is capacitated by seed. This third entity is not a woman; it is not even a human being. It is, rather, the water of the baptismal font. That water, Narsai contends, is a womb which, once inseminated, is prepared to bring forth new life. It is changed, and it changes the human beings who enter it and go forth baptized. Being a womb, the water needs an inseminator, and in Narsai's conception, that is the priest who conducts the ritual. "As seed," he explains, the priest "sows his speech in the womb of the water. It conceives and it bears a new unfamiliar offspring. His mouth translates spiritual words to that silent thing, and the water (thus) receives the power to grant life to reason."²⁰ The word Narsai chooses to speak of the priest's action is pregnant with meaning: *m̃targem* is to translate, but also to exchange, to interpret, or to convert from one format to another. The priest is one kind of being, whose words activate the natural but dormant qualities in others; the water is like Eve and Mary, in that all three are changed by speech, brought online, so to speak, as their inherent passivity is converted by their contact with the seed of an active agent.

This appears to be a new way of thinking, distinct from the concepts espoused by other known ritual theorists of Late Antiquity. As much is evident from the distance between Narsai's thought and that of the writers who influenced him in other matters. When it comes to ritual, Narsai draws on several writers' work but none so extensively as Theodore of Mopsuestia. Theodore, who lived roughly half a century before Narsai, wrote some of the most detailed late ancient texts on ritual, about both the Eucharist and baptism. To help new Christians acclimate to these unfamiliar practices, Theodore mentions many different real-world situations to which these rituals can be compared. In his discussions of baptism in particular, there is nothing that matches the frequency of his reference to baptism as a kind of naturalization. When a Christian is baptized, she is joining a new community; so, like a new citizen, she bears the rights and obligations of her

²⁰ Narsai, *Mēmra* 38 'On the Mysteries and Baptism' (ed. Mingana 1.345.4–5).

place.²¹ Theodore does, at one point, describe baptism as an event involving an insemination, but his array of images in this vein is distinct from Narsai's theory of the ritual. Consider how Theodore explains what he imagines to happen at baptism:

Just as the seed that falls into the womb of the mother has neither life, nor soul, nor perception, but once it has been shaped by the divine, a living person blooms, who has soul and perception, and bears a human nature competent in all human actions, so too, the one who is baptized falls into the water as into a womb; he is a seed that bears no sign of an immortal nature. When he has been baptized and has received divine and spiritual grace, a real and thoroughgoing change will happen.²²

Theodore's figuring, in a sense, follows the logic Paul used in 1 Corinthians 15, about seeds and plants being akin to regular bodies and resurrection bodies. That is, he portrays baptism as a conception that produces an embryo which only matures at resurrection, and the resurrected Christian *is* the person who was first sown when baptized. In this schema, the seed is not a donation from the officiating priest. Instead, the seed is the Christian himself.

Narsai may have taken some of the images of baptism from Theodore – like the “womb of the water” – but he has developed his own theory of just what happens at baptism. The actors in the ritual are figured differently in Narsai's writing: There is no Christian before baptism, and after baptism, a Christian has been produced from the priest's seed and the womb of the water. Thus, though he was certainly working within a broad set of parameters established by Theodore's work, Narsai has advanced a different model of baptism and different knowledge about what it accomplishes.

Thus, there is a continuity between the model of action that determined humanity's status when Eve and Mary encountered the seed of powerful beings, and the action that creates a new human being when the priest's seed contacts the water of the baptismal font. Taken together, these vignettes show us that, for Narsai, priests belong in the same category as Gabriel and Satan: All three are inseminators who, at crucial points, change the status of previously passive entities, enabling them to bring about new states for human beings. To put priests on this level is unusual in late ancient Christian thought, but it is not unusual for Narsai. Among the writers whose treatises on ritual survive from Late Antiquity, Narsai tended to elevate priests far above the status granted to them by his peers. For example, while other writers had asked their listeners to imagine angels surrounding priests while they performed rituals, Narsai claimed that the angels were there specifically because they depended on the priest's completion

²¹ See especially his *On Baptism* (ed. A. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* [WS 6; Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1933]).

²² Theodore of Mopsuestia, *On Baptism* (ed. Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 187).

of the rituals in order to “open the door to their holies.”²³ A robust view of the priesthood is an intrinsic part of Narsai’s thought, and in his theory of insemination, too, a priest is different, elevated above others to accomplish a conception quite beyond what normal human men could do.

If my reading of Narsai’s emerging theories about the changes happening in human history or in ongoing Christian ritual strikes you as odd, you are in good company. The prolific scholar of the late ancient Syriac world, Sebastian Brock, has offered guidance about how to interpret those theological writings that discuss seed, and the various kinds of wombs that might admit seed. In an introduction to a collection of Syriac hymns about Mary he edited, Brock worried that a reader would encounter talk of Eve’s ears and Mary’s ears, hear them referred to as wombs, and would be led beyond the limits of good sense. He warned, “Although a superficial reading” of such texts “might lead one to think that the Syriac poets are indulging in a literalism that could verge on the ridiculous, what they are doing is much more sophisticated: by means of visually dramatic images such as this they are pointing the reader to hidden spiritual reality (*sic*) that cannot be described in concrete terms.”²⁴ Of course, this warning was issued in a volume aimed at an audience of Christian readers; we might expect such a thing in a confessional collection, but not in an academic one. And yet, scholarly writing about these kinds of images in late ancient Christianity has often included a subtler version of the same warning, an exhortation to look for the “spiritual” meaning behind reproductive language in theological discussions.²⁵

Such statements are usually made by an authority in the field, but they are also a statement *of* authority in the field. Meant as a strong admonition about legitimate and illegitimate ways to read a text, they are there to steer scholarly readers away from what might seem a “superficial” reading. I always wonder when I find these kinds of flags: If the reading one is being warned against is truly superficial, why would it require this kind of warning? In this case, Brock offers an alternate hermeneutic for reading Syriac riffs on women, their ears, and their wombs. It is a rule of interpretation borrowed from an ancient author, Pseudo-Dionysius – when a text says something that is obviously not right, readers should not take it literally; instead, it must be a signal to the reader to look beyond the text toward something deeper.²⁶ Of course the question then becomes, “obviously not right” to whom? The Pseudo-Dionysian rule of reading, when it is called upon, is quite

²³ E. Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 196–198.

²⁴ S. P. Brock, *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kerala: SEERI, 1994), 6.

²⁵ Arentzen suggests that the trope of conception through the ear was a deliberate attempt to redirect attention from the more customary locations of insemination and conception (*Virgin in Song*, 72–75).

²⁶ This theory, that scripture contains “dissimilar similarities,” is explained in Ps-Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy*, 2.

revealing. It signals a distance between what the interpreter is willing to consider as a possible meaning and what the text seems to represent as its meaning. When those two things are far apart, then the text is thought to be pointing elsewhere, toward something hidden, and usually loftier, more appropriate, and less disconcerting to the interpreter.

But why would themes of reproduction and the generation of human beings be inappropriate for specifically historical considerations of ancient Christian theology? Instead of limiting out these ancient theorizations of the human being and her nature, we should recognize that the different instances of insemination Narsai knew and wrote about were parts of the divine economy on which his Christianity was centered: a mother, her son, and the generation of a family of Christians through time. We will grasp more of late ancient Christian thought when we hesitate before dismissing notions that strike us as strange or out of place because of the categories to which we assign them. Instead, in their own contexts, far-ranging as those contexts may be, such ideas constitute the knowledge about the world and our condition in it that late ancient Christians developed and sustained.

Painting Metaphors as a Means of Theological Expression in Narsai

Eva M. Rodrigo Gómez

Introduction

At the risk of overgeneralizing, it may be fair to say that the Syriac worldview and its literature, in contrast to Greek literature, prefer narrations to theoretical lucubrations and images to abstract concepts. This is especially true in Syriac theological poetry, where the author that is our focus, Narsai, is to be found.¹ Reading his *mēmre*, one notices immediately the richness of his metaphors that include music, gardening, medicine, and, above all, art. In fact, a common epithet in Narsai's work for God is "Artist (*'ummānā*)."² In the present article, I will focus on the painting metaphors that Narsai employs in his exegesis and theology. I will begin by examining briefly pictorial art in Late Antiquity, both in the Roman and Sasanian Empires and the opinion that the first Christians had about such art and then move to the Syriac world and finally to Narsai. Given the state of the field – most *mēmre* are still without critical editions and translations – I will limit my inquiry to the more accessible works, such as the homilies studied by Conolly, Frishman, McLeod, Gignoux, and Siman.² I have consulted the Syriac texts, but my translations follow theirs with some modifications.

Painting in the Roman Empire

As pictorial art in Roman culture is an extremely wide topic, I will limit myself to a brief cultural framing in order hopefully to better understand the words

¹ For the importance of images and materiality in Narsai, see A. Becker's article in this volume (pp. 25–40), where he, among other considerations, notes: "Narsai employs the language of the visual to describe what is least visible".

² R. H. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai* (Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 8.1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909); J. Frishman, *The Ways and Means of the Divine Economy: An Edition, Translation and Study of Six Biblical Homilies by Narsai* (Ph.D. Diss., Universiteit Leiden, 1992); F. G. McLeod, *Narsai's Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension* (PO 40.1; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979); P. Gignoux, *Homélies de Narsai sur la création* (PO 34.2–4; Turnhout: Brepols, 1968); E. P. Siman, *Narsai. Cinq homélies sur les paraboles évangéliques* (Paris: Cariscript, 1984).

of Narsai, given the fact that he lived a significant part of his life in the Roman empire, even if he was Persian of origin and dwelt in the Aramean area.

When we think about painting in antiquity, the first thing that probably comes to our mind is wall-painting like those found in Pompey. But to read and to understand Narsai, we should perhaps look instead at panel-painting, like the great examples of the mummy portraits found in the Fayyum in Egypt completed during the Roman occupation, and even at illuminated manuscripts, already present by the time of Narsai. In panel-painting, we probably should think not so much about encaustic techniques, which mix the pigments with hot beeswax, but tempera, which uses a water-soluble binder medium such as egg yolk.

With regard to the importance of painting in the Roman Empire, although there were some famous painters from aristocratic origin, such as Fabius Pictor (ca. 304 BCE), artistic crafts like painting and music, although important in Greek education, were largely ignored by the Roman upper class during the Republican period. Thus, painters in Rome were normally of humble origin, even if some of them became famous due to their works. Approaching the first century BCE, Greek painting became trendy, and therefore we know of several painters coming from the Eastern, Greek regions of the Empire of Rome, including some female painters such as Iaia of Cyzicus. During the Imperial period, however, it seems that the artists were mostly local ones. Both the *pictor imaginarius*, the figure-painter, and the *plastes imaginarius*, the clay or stucco modeller, seem to have been very well paid compared to other artists around the fourth century, according to the Edict of Diocletian (301), which indicates that painting was an important and esteemed craft at that time.³

Narsai, as we know, lived a considerable part of his life in Edessa, which was still the bastion of Aramaic culture, with important artistic and literary traditions, so much so that it was known as “the Athens of the Aramean world.”⁴ Nonetheless, the city was of Greek foundation and belonged in this period to the Roman Empire, so the influx of Greco-Roman culture, that was developing into “Byzantine” culture, was significant.

Painting in the Sasanian Empire

While the history of art in the Sasanian Empire is far less studied than Roman and early Byzantine art,⁵ we know that in the fourth century, already in the period of Shapur II (309–379), paintings and mosaics were popular, with particular attention to the representations of hunting and battle scenes, according to the Roman

³ L. Roger, *Roman Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212–213.

⁴ I. Peña, *The Christian Art of the Byzantine Syria* (London: Garnet Publishing, 1997), 45–46.

⁵ M. Compareti, “The State of Research on Sasanian Painting,” *e-Sasanika* 13 (2011): 1.

historian Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 330–395).⁶ This Sasanian pictorial art, possibly because of a well-established tradition, seems to represent the figures in a “two-dimensional” way, without necessarily looking for the most realistic result.⁷

Although almost none of these works have been preserved due to the fragility of the material, it seems also that illuminated manuscripts were widespread. This could have been due to the influence of Manicheism,⁸ given the importance of pictorial art and illustrated manuscripts in that religion, beginning with Mani himself, who was a skilful painter and who even painted several illustrations in order to explain Manichean doctrine in his sacred book, the *Arzhang*, which is now lost.

Both the “book-painter” and the “general painter” were to be found in the Sasanian empire among the artisans of the bazaars,⁹ so we can think that painting was a requested craft throughout society.

Painting among the First Christians

When we come to the Christian world, among the Church Fathers there was a clear diversity of opinions with regard to images. Pre-Nicene writers such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even a council at Elvira at the beginning of the fourth century were all against the use of images in churches and among Christians because, following the Old Testament prohibition, they considered them idolatry. Nonetheless, many paintings of the Roman catacombs date from the second and third centuries, as does the decorated baptistery of Dura-Europos which is dated before 256. The Jewish community too was not faithful to the ban against image representation, considering their catacombs in Rome and the synagogues of both Dura-Europos and Galilee.

Besides the Fathers of the Church, we can see other examples as the apocryphal *Acts of John*, from the second century, where it is said that John’s disciple Lycomedes commissioned a portrait of the Apostle to put it in his bedroom with flowers and candles to pray to it, and, from the third and fourth centuries, it became common to paint portraits of Apostles and bishops, taking inspiration from the *imago clipeata*, the origin of the funerary roman portraits.¹⁰

It seems, however, that attitudes among the theologians changed around the fourth century because the Fathers of the Church who were against images be-

⁶ *Res Gestae*, 24.6.3 (ed. J. C. Rolfe, *Ammianus Marcellinus* [LCL 300, 315, 331; rev. 3rd. ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971–1972]).

⁷ Compareti, “The State of Research on Sasanian Painting,” 20.

⁸ M. R. Anand, *Persian Painting* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930), 11.

⁹ T. Daryae, *Sasanian Empire: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 142.

¹⁰ T. Velmans (ed.), *In viaggio dell’icona, dalle origini alla caduta di Bisanzio* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2002), 10.

came a minority, Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius of Salamis being the most important ones, while the majority, such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, and Jerome, wrote positively about paintings of biblical scenes decorating the interior of the churches, justifying them, often as the *Biblia pauperum*, because they instructed the illiterate and poor faithful.¹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 328–390) explains, “even painting, though silent, knows how to speak on a wall and to bring the greatest help.”¹² Later, Gregory the Great (540–604) states more explicitly that what the scriptures represent for the learned, paintings represent for the illiterate.¹³

Within the Syriac world, and especially around Edessa, the defence of the images of Christ, Mary, and the saints was often based on the existence of the *mandylion*, because, if Christ himself had printed his face in a cloth, how could it be wrong to represent it? Besides, illuminated manuscripts were also important among these Christians, as we can see with the great example of the Rabbula Gospels, less than a century after Narsai.¹⁴

The Art of Painting among Syriac Authors

We now turn for a brief moment to the Syriac ones, before we come to Narsai. Sidney Griffith wrote an insightful article in which he speaks of the image of the image-maker in Ephrem.¹⁵ In this article, he shows how important this kind of vocabulary and imagery are for the “harp of the Spirit,” and how we can speak about an “iconic theology” in Ephrem. He nonetheless does not explain the origin of this use, that is to say, what inspired Ephrem to draw on painting as a theological image. Griffith quotes another article by Edmund Beck in which he explains that, for Ephrem, “to think is to imagine, that is, to form images in the mirror of the mind.”¹⁶

¹¹ H. Crouzel, “Immagine II. Utilizzazione e culto delle immagini,” in A. di Berardino (ed.), *Nuovo dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiana*, vol. II (2nd ed.; Milan: Marietti, 2007), col. 2538–2542.

¹² R.A. Greer, *One Path for All. Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2015), 46.

¹³ Letter XI, 10 to Serenus of Marseilles (ed. V. Recchia, *Lettere [XI–XIV, Appendici]* [Opere di Gregorio Magno V/4; Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1999], 38): *Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes uident quod sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt.*

¹⁴ M. Bernabò (ed.), *Il Tetravangelo di Rabbula: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 1.56. L'illustrazione del Nuovo Testamento nella Siria del VI secolo* (Folia picta 1; Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008).

¹⁵ S.H. Griffith, “The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian,” *SP* 25 (1993): 258–269.

¹⁶ E. Beck, *Ephräms des Syrers Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre* (CSCO 419; Leuven: Peeters, 1980), 33.

Griffith collects the terms used by Ephrem linked with the pictorial world, such as artists (*ṣayyārē*), images (*ṣurātā*), drawings (*ršimē*), figures (*ṣalmē*), likenesses (*demwātā*), paints (*sammānē*), colors (*gawnē*), and plaques (*dappē*).¹⁷ All these words are also employed by Narsai in his writings, as well as by Jacob of Serugh. Therefore, this means of expression constitutes an interesting and sound link between all three of these poets and theologians.

There is an argument that the Church of the East was against the use of images, but the study of the evidence shows the opposite, according to Ken Parry, Jean Dauvillier, and Herman Teule, among others.¹⁸ Thus Narsai lived in a period in which the Church leaders were in fact not against images, since Syriac authors such as Ephrem drew on that field in their works, and this artistic craft was widespread and esteemed both in the Roman and Sasanian Empire.

The Art of Painting in Narsai

Narsai used this exegetical “tool” to describe the human being as an image and God as an artist who paints creation and the incarnation, who depicts how sin is a stain that has tarnished the beautiful work of God, and how redemption is an artistic process that restores the lost beauty, along with some resources to preserve that beauty. Furthermore, Narsai himself speaks of his own homilies as paintings.

*The Human Being as Image*¹⁹

It seems evident that the inspiration for all the painting and artistic metaphors in Narsai comes primarily from Genesis 1:26–27 and 2:7, where it is written that the human being is created by God himself “according to His image” and that He fashioned it. Accordingly, Narsai envisages God as the great Artist and Painter, making this an extraordinary exegetical tool with which to interpret various biblical episodes.

One example appears in *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’ (1–16):

¹⁷ Griffith, “The Image of the Image Maker in the Poetry of St. Ephraem the Syrian,” 262.

¹⁸ K. Parry, “Images in the Church of the East: The Evidence from Central Asia and China,” *BJRULM* 78 (1996): 143–162; J. Dauvillier, “Quelques témoignages littéraires et archéologiques sur la présence et sur le culte des images dans l’ancienne église chaldéenne,” *Orientalia Christiana* 1:3 (1956): 297–304; H. Teule, “The Veneration of Images in the East Syriac Tradition,” in B. Gronenberg and H. Spieckermann (eds.), *Die Welt der Götterbilder* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 324–346.

¹⁹ See F.G. McLeod, “Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai,” *TS* 42 (1981): 458–468 for a further and more comprehensive study of the topic.

A rational image the Creator willed to fashion for Adam; and He mixed a spirit with the pigments of his lowly clay. He fashioned, first of all, an earthen vessel from dust and anointed it with the spirit; and the whole became a living being. He painted limbs on the coloured visible clay and breathed the invisible spirit into the visible one. O Painter Who has concealed His artistic power and set the beauty of His fair image within a panel! According to mortal art, exterior (qualities) charm and show viewers the beauty of their fashionings. According to divine art, interior (qualities) charm and the exterior are but a covering for the interior. A twofold vessel the Fashioner of the universe made for our nature: a visible body and a hidden soul – one man. He made the exterior from dust that is lowly to look upon and fashioned the interior from the secret (recesses) of His majestic power.²⁰

It is noteworthy that even if Narsai speaks about Adam as a clay vessel, taking language from Genesis 2, he still speaks about *painting* this image, mixing the pigments with the spirit, as if it were the binding agent or *medium*, the role the egg normally plays in tempera. He seems indeed to think of tempera painting when later on he speaks about the “board” on which God paints, with the word *dappā*, that can be used both for the “page” of a manuscript and for the “wood panel” painters use with this technique.

God as an Artist

When Narsai describes God’s creation, which He made through his “Sign” (*remzā*), God appears as a Painter (*ṣayyārā*) and an Artist (*ummānā*) as we can see here:

Like pigments the Sign mixed with the words of His mouth and painted the creatures that were not visible while they were being fashioned. In the likeness of an image, He formed the world that was in the beginning and He took it and put it in front of the spectators, so they could observe it. With great order did the Painter accomplish his art because He painted the creatures and then the icon of the name of the Creator.²¹

Here again, even when the biblical text speaks about creation through language, Narsai imagines the creation process as a painting that God creates using his mouth as a brush and then shows it to the angels, the “spectators.” It is interesting that, although God paints the whole Creation, only the human being is the “icon of the name of the Creator,” because only he has the divine likeness.

Later on, in the same *mēmṛā*, Narsai describes this operation saying that God, as a painter, covers His artwork with the veil of darkness until unveiling it the next morning:

With the tunic of darkness He covered the earth in the beginning of its existence, like a painter who paints an image and then reveals it. In the evening time, the Master of the

²⁰ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘On Epiphany’ (ed. McLeod 70–71).

²¹ *Mēmṛā* 61 ‘On Creation II’, 7–12 (ed. Gignoux 558–559).

world painted the world; in the morning time He took away the veil that was over it. To the likeness of an image He formed and made the sky and the earth and He summoned the rational ones to come and see the beauty of its fairness.²²

While in another *mēmṛā*, he speaks of the creation of the firmament as a knitted dress while the luminaries are painted decorations on it:

Like a dress of white color wove His Sign and painted in it seals: the sun and the moon, shining lights.²³

But God does not only show himself as an artist in the creation. We can see in *Mēmṛā* 68 'On the Tower of Babel' how Narsai resorts to this kind of image to explain even the division of peoples into various languages:

The Commandment dyed the word that proceeded from [the soul] with another pigment so it acquired a color and changed voice and it wondered at this.²⁴

Sin Tarnishes the Painting

After establishing that God is an artist, and man is his artwork, it is logical to think of sin as a stain and something that ruins his beauty, making the bright colors fade and become pale:

The beauty of the pigments of his soul faded because of (his) desire for fruit; and he acquired the color of mortality by (his) eating of it. Sin effaced the name of life (belonging to) the royal image and inscribed on his name "corruption," and "death" upon his limbs. (The image) became tarnished and wasted away for a long time in (his) mortal condition; and death trampled him and corrupted the beauty of his rational being. His ill-wisher mocked and also laughed at his humiliation; and he lost hope that he would be renewed from his corruption.²⁵

This loss of the beauty of the divine pigments leads to the person's disfigurement, as we read in the *mēmṛā* about David and Saul:

Adam was lovely and David was handsome before they sinned; the Evil One disfigured the fairest of all with his treachery.²⁶

But the sins of people stain not only themselves but the whole of creation, and so God wants to clean and purify it, first with the flood:

The evil of man has stained the seemly garment of Creation. Behold I am going to purge it with a deluge and purify its filth.²⁷

²² *Mēmṛā* 61 'On Creation II', 221–224 (ed. Gignoux 568–570).

²³ *Mēmṛā* 63 'On Creation I', 57–58 (ed. Gignoux 528–529).

²⁴ *Mēmṛā* 68 'On the Tower of Babel', 320–321 (ed. Frishman 1.71).

²⁵ *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany', 27–34 (ed. McLeod 72–73).

²⁶ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 145–146 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.179.6–7).

²⁷ *Mēmṛā* 71 'On the Flood', 129–132 (ed. Frishman 1.27).

And then with the incarnation:

The iniquity of man had stained the world with shameful things and the Beneficent One turned and purified it through the death of one man.²⁸

The Incarnation as a Painting

Christ comes to clean the stain of sin. Narsai describes the incarnation as a painting, in which the Word of God becomes the quill or brush with which God paints with “invisible colors” on the panel of the body of Mary, as we read in the *mēmṛā* on Nativity:

Without the pigments (of human seed), He paints an image on the panel of your body, so that He might thereby signify the authority of His hidden Offspring.²⁹

In the same *mēmṛā*, Narsai specifies that the painting occurs inside Mary’s womb, with a rather corporeal description:

Without the pigments of human seed, He painted him in the womb, so that He might exalt his conception above the rule (established) for his companions.³⁰

But, for Narsai, the panel is also human nature:

His Will descended unto His fashioning with admirable love; and He painted on the panel of Adam’s body, a Second Adam. In the (same) order as Adam, He painted a (Second) Adam with the pigment of the Sign, and renewed Adam and his offspring through (this) Son of Adam.³¹

And He paints not only Christ but all human babies:

Mary paid the fee of her conception to the One Who paints babies, and offered a sacrifice according to the Law to the One Who opens bosoms.³²

Redemption as a Work of Art

God is an artist, but, first of all and above all that, there is the deep awareness that God’s motivation to save humanity is because He loves humanity. All his efforts are driven by that fact, especially the work of redemption:

The one who loves human beings loved and still loves the image of the human being, so in every occasion He wants people to be saved.³³

²⁸ *Mēmṛā* 76 ‘On Enoch and Elijah’, 439–440 (ed. Frishman 1.13).

²⁹ *Mēmṛā* 4 ‘On Nativity’, 117–118 (ed. McLeod 44–45). Cf. also *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘On Epiphany’, 389–392 (ed. McLeod 94–95).

³⁰ *Mēmṛā* 4 ‘On Nativity’, 179–180 (ed. McLeod 48–49).

³¹ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘On Epiphany’, 51–54 (ed. McLeod 72–75).

³² *Mēmṛā* 4 ‘On Nativity’, 385–386 (ed. McLeod 60–61).

³³ *Mēmṛā* 76 ‘On Enoch and Elijah’, 381–382 (ed. Frishman 1.15).

While Paul says that God cancelled humanity's debtors' bill (*štar ḥawbayn*),³⁴ Narsai says He painted it:

Because of iniquity, mortals became slaves for death; now I am painting the debtors' bill through the deliverance of your life.³⁵

As it does with the whole of Redemption:

Because of the hatefulness of our iniquity, the beauty of our comely image was tarnished; but He painted us again in spiritual pigments. Evil envy had effaced our outward features; but He has now changed and engraved them within the panel (of man's body).³⁶

But, after the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, this saving work remains active in the Church, through the Sacraments performed by the priests, baptism being especially important, where God paints in the water the salvation:

Spiritually, without colors, was He pleased to paint us; that the beauty of our image might not again be corrupted by death. O Painter, that paints an image upon the panel of the waters, nor is His art hindered by opposition! O Artist, that breathes the Spirit (and works) without hands, and sows life immortal in mortality! ... Before its creation the image of our renewal was painted before Him.³⁷

Actually, the hands of God are the priests, who, even if they are only creatures, they can paint salvation in other human beings:

(God teaches the priest:) A spiritual art He taught them, that they could paint the living image on the panel of water. Oh, corporeal ones, painters of the Spirit that has no hands. Oh, mortals mixers of life with mortality.³⁸

The Oil of Mercy

After Narsai makes it clear that the human being is a painting, that sin is a stain that ruins this piece of art, that it needs to be cleaned, purified, and repainted as Christ does with his life and the Church with the sacraments, Narsai speaks about a protection used to preserve the beautiful colors of God's painting. That is with the "oil of mercy," as we see when he explains the parable of the ten virgins:³⁹

³⁴ Cf. Col 2:14.

³⁵ *Mēmṛā* 74 'On David and Saul', 469–470 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.792.18–19).

³⁶ *Mēmṛā* 6 'On Epiphany', 375–378 (ed. McLeod 92–93).

³⁷ *Mēmṛā* 39 'On Baptism' (ed. Mingana 1.356; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 33).

³⁸ *Mēmṛā* 39 'On Baptism' (ed. Mingana 1.357.12–15; trans. Connolly, *The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai*, 34).

³⁹ For a further study of the target of this *mēmṛā*, see D. Becerra's article in this volume (pp. 9–23).

With the oil that is lacking (in the lamps), the scarcity of deeds He paints to show to us that they were meagre and not enriched by love and mercy.⁴⁰

Then, once it is clear that the oil is mercy, Narsai writes:

Without oil He paints the icon of the foolish ones, because they had not softened by their words the ulcers of sin. With oil he mixed the way of life of the wise ones, because the body and the soul together pitied, had compassion and were fruitful. Because of the oil of mercy that enriches their ways of life they resisted and were not spoiled during the length of time. Also the painters accustom to do this, because thanks to the oil they preserve the image without corruption. The oil they mix with the pigments and paint images, so by the oil the image remains without alteration. And if the painters know how to preserve the lower sort of image, how much more it is just to the men to keep the image of their icon.⁴¹

Throughout this *mēmṛā*, Narsai insists that being merciful is what redeems humanity and allows humanity to enter in the kingdom of heaven, and he does it through his knowledge of panel painting. To this day iconographers still use a special oil (normally flax oil with some resins) called “olifa” to fix the colors and preserve their icons.⁴² The olifa is the most efficient way to shield the paintings against the external agents through time, just as the exercise of mercy is the best way for the christian to keep the divine image.

Painting as Poetic Creation

This last section addresses the topic of Narsai himself as an artist who paints with words. Just as God mixes pigments with His words when creating the world, so Narsai conceives of his homilies as pictures:

The image of the King my thoughts have painted on a panel of words; and by my words I have wanted to show it to viewers. He has permitted me to paint an image of the promise (he made) in words: that he has granted forgiveness to the members of his household by the seal of his name. He gave his word and promised a renewal of the body and redemption of the soul, and he wrote these out on the two tablets of water and the Spirit.⁴³

Here we see how Narsai imagines his *mēmṛē* as the panels on which he paints his artwork, with the difference that this time the viewers are not the angels, as in the case of God and the Creation, but the faithful who listen and read his homilies.

But, as we see in this next passage, Narsai’s motivation is a spiritual one:

Their (the saints’) love stirred me toward their travails like an infant, and I sought to paint the image of their beauty with the pigment of my word.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 74 (ed. Siman 11).

⁴¹ *Mēmṛā* 27 ‘On the Parable of the Ten Virgins’, 77–83 (ed. Siman 12).

⁴² L. Uspenskij and V. Losskij, *Il senso delle icone* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2007), 64.

⁴³ *Mēmṛā* 6 ‘On Epiphany’, 525–530 (ed. McLeod 102–103).

⁴⁴ *Mēmṛā* 74 ‘On David and Saul’, 13–14 (ed. Patriarchal Press 2.773.17–18).

What moves Narsai to create, to paint his works, is the desire to draw the faithful closer to the saints, to the King, that is to say Christ, and therefore to God.

Conclusion

The topic of art in Narsai is truly vast and therefore can hardly be fully appreciated in this brief article, in which I have not examined Narsai's use of painting in its entirety. There are many other examples that could be adduced such as the use of painting metaphors for exegesis and the connection between art and medicine through the word *sammā* (meaning both "pigment" and "drug"); so, God can paint redemption through the healing of the human being. Furthermore, there are other artistic fields that Narsai employs such as pottery.

Nonetheless, these few examples show Narsai's ability to use this versatile metaphor to explain deep theological concepts in a most creative way. Reading his *mēmre* one can appreciate both the vast knowledge of the Bible and the life of the Church on the one hand and his familiarity with the world of art on the other. Although we do not know from his biography whether he had any training in art or painting, these *mēmre* suggest so as he seems to know the techniques and methods that painters employ, maybe known during his years in the cities of Edessa and Nisibis, for, as we have seen, there were many artisans of this field in the typical city, both Roman and Sasanian.

We also see the creativity of Narsai, who explains all sorts of notions through this means, even when the biblical text or the Syriac tradition tend to resort to other means, such as the metaphor of pottery or clothing imagery. Even if he is not the first and only author to do so, it cannot be denied that Narsai utilizes these metaphors with great artistry and invention.

Finally, we can see how Narsai, in any case, wanted to instruct and edify his audience,⁴⁵ and he did so with the help of painting imagery in two ways: On the one hand, he uses it to catechize and to do exegesis, and, on the other hand, he sees his own compositions in a sort of way as a continuation of the work of the Great Artist: God. Thus, Narsai accomplished in language what the *Biblia pauperum* accomplished in art. Through sacred words and sacred art ancient peoples encountered the mystery of God.

⁴⁵ As D. Becerra also points out in his article (pp. 9–23). In fact, we can see along the different articles in this volume that this includes the exhortation to be good discerners and to act well, as C. E. Morrison's article explains (pp. 161–173), and the "strong appeal to imitate Jesus Christ", as J. Childers concludes in his article (p. 90), because, as K. Heal explains in his article, Narsai's concern was pastoral (pp. 133–143).

“How the Weak Rib Prevailed!”

Eve and the Canaanite Woman in the Poetry of Narsai

Erin Galgay Walsh

Introduction

The plethora of female biblical figures within Syriac poetry raises tantalizing questions concerning the motivations and intentions of Late Antique writers. While the authors of sacred scripture attributed little or no speech to women, Syriac poets moved them from the periphery to the center of their re-narrations, attributing to them soliloquies and dramatic dialogues.¹ Both Old and New Testament narratives featuring women were fruitful sites for theological and ethical reflection.² This literary treasury stands in sharp distinction to our limited resources for reconstructing the lives of women within Syriac-speaking com-

¹ S. P. Brock, “Creating Women’s Voices: Sarah and Tamar in Some Syriac Narrative Poems,” in E. Grypeou and H. Spurling (eds.), *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 125–142; S. A. Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,” *J ECS* 9 (2001): 105–131; eadem, “On Mary’s Voice: Gendered Words in Syriac Marian Tradition,” in D. B. Martin and P. C. Miller (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 63–86. Syriac poets participated in a larger trend also found in Late Antique homiletics, namely the inclusion of fictive discourse and related rhetorical tropes. J. Kecskeméti provides a helpful overview of these features in the works of Greek preachers, in her “Personnages tragiques et personnages comiques dans les homélies dramatisées des prédicateurs grecs,” *Euphrosyne* 22 (1994): 45–61; eadem, “Deux caractéristiques de la prédication chez les prédicateurs pseudo-chrysostomiens: La répétition et le discours fictif,” *A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 14 (1996): 15–36. The impulse to focus on the voices and personalities of women in the Greek poet Romanos Melodos has been richly explored in T. Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

² A. Salvesen, “Keeping it in the Family? Jacob and his Aramean Heritage According to Jewish and Christian Sources,” in Grypeou and Spurling (eds.), *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, 205–220; S. A. Harvey, “Impudent Women: Matthew 1:1–16 in Syriac Tradition,” *PdO* 35 (2010): 65–76; eadem, “Encountering Eve in the Syriac Liturgy,” in M. Doerfler, K. Smith, and E. Fiano (eds.), *Syriac Encounters: Papers Presented at the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, 2011* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 11–49; H. M. Hunt, “The Tears of the Sinful Woman: A Theology of Redemption in the Homilies of St. Ephraim and his Followers,” *Hugoye* 1 (1998): 165–184.

munities, a subject to which we will return.³ The lack of verifiable female authors within Syriac literature compels scholars to look elsewhere for evidence. Literary representations of women are our dominant source for partially uncovering the social expectations and ideological commitments that conditioned women's lives within Syriac-speaking communities in Late Antiquity.⁴ Attention to the female figures within the *madrāšē* and *mēm̄rē* of Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh has enriched our understanding of the reception of biblical literature as well as the theorization of gender within these communities. The availability of printed editions and (increasingly) numerous modern language translations of Ephrem and Jacob's works have encouraged such scholarly engagement.⁵

In comparison to Ephrem and Jacob, Narsai's (d. ca. 500) treatment of female biblical figures has received little attention, a situation this volume and accompanying translation project will do much to ameliorate.⁶ Scholars have mined his theologically complex and rhetorically sophisticated poetry for its doctrinal

³ Feminist historians have continually wrestled with the absence of women authors and first-person accounts, and the development of theoretically-informed reading strategies has been instrumental for using the extant resources. For these discussions, see E.A. Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Antique Christianity," *JESCS* 2 (1994): 155–184; eadem, "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'," *JESCS* 6 (1998): 413–430; G. Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-styles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 128–138. There has been an extensive amount of work done on the place of women within ecclesial organization. See, for example, S.P. Brock, "Deaconesses in the Syriac Tradition," in P. Vazheparampil (ed.), *Women in Prism and Focus: Her Profile in Major World Religions and in Christian Traditions* (Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996), 205–218; G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church," *OCP* 39 (1973): 191–215 and 419–444; S.A. Harvey, "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant. Women's Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 8 (2005): 125–149.

⁴ S.P. Brock and S.A. Harvey have wrestled with the question of female authors in Syriac literature. They discuss the self-proclaimed female authorship within *The Life of Febronina* in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), preface, 150–176, and 192–193. As they note, such statements of authorial self-presentation could be a rhetorical strategy. If our resources render problematic historical reconstruction, we must also acknowledge that any attempt to discern the social forces that produced such representations and constructions of women are equally tentative and partial in nature. For an overview of the methodological and theoretical concerns, see R. Kraemer, "Introduction," in *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6–11.

⁵ S.P. Brock, "Ephrem," in *GEDSH*, 145–147; idem, "A Brief Guide to the Main Editions and Translations of the Works of St. Ephrem," *The Harp* 3 (1990): 7–29; K. den Biesen, *Annotated Bibliography of Ephrem the Syrian* (United States of America: Lulu Press, 2011); S.P. Brock, "Ya'qub of Serugh," in *GEDSH*, 433–435; K. Alwan, "Bibliographie générale raisonnée de Jacques de Saroug (521)," *PdO* 13 (1986): 313–383; P. Bedjan, *Homiliae selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis* (Paris–Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910); republished, with an additional volume, as P. Bedjan and S.P. Brock, *Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2006).

⁶ The fragmentary and incomplete nature of the printed editions of Narsai's poetry, along with the paucity of reliable translations, has contributed to this neglect. Essential guides include W.F. Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," *OCP* 29 (1973): 275–306; S.P. Brock, "A Guide to Narsai's Homilies," *Hugoye* 12 (2009): 21–40.

teachings, illuminating the Christology and intellectual history of what would become the Church of the East.⁷ The study of female figures within Narsai's oeuvre has relied heavily on a single work from the extant 81 *mēmṛē*, namely *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*.⁸ While Narsai did not treat gynocentric biblical narratives frequently, there are several pertinent *mēmṛē* that await study such as *Mēmṛā 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'*.⁹ This *mēmṛā*, recently edited and translated by the present author for the first time, expands our resources for mapping the reception of biblical women in Narsai's works and reveals a fuller spectrum of gendered rhetoric than an isolated reading of *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* allows.¹⁰

⁷ Narsai composed verse homilies (*mēmṛē*) on a range of topics including biblical interpretation of Old and New Testament figures, liturgical feasts, and doctrinal debate. There are 81 extant *mēmṛē* thought to exist, surviving in manuscripts and partially available in various printed editions. Narsai favored a dodecasyllabic meter, occasionally employing a heptasyllabic meter as evidenced in the present work. There are several dialogue poems (*soḡyātā*) attributed to Narsai, but they are most likely pseudonymous compositions. Our main sources for recounting Narsai's life, the *Ecclesiastical History* and *Cause of the Foundation of the Schools*, attributed to Barḥadbshabba 'Arbaya, are at times inconsistent and must be read with an eye to their rhetorical construction. As both a poet and teacher of exegesis at the School of Edessa and the School of Nisibis, Narsai was among the first generation of Syriac writers to reflect upon the theology and biblical interpretative procedure of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428). The translation of Theodore's writings into Syriac in the first half of the fifth century, a project centered at the School of Edessa, coincided with the fateful events around the Council of Chalcedon and the strife surrounding the Christological debates. See L. Van Rompay, "Narsai," in *GEDSH*, 303–304 as well as Butts's contribution to the present volume (pp. 1–8).

⁸ Ed. Mingana 2.353–365; trans. C. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof of Eve's Daughters and the 'Tricks and Devices' they Perform," *Le Muséon* 106 (1993): 65–87. I have largely followed Molenberg's translation, and I will indicate when adjustments have been made. Molenberg produced a fine translation with introduction, noting the major themes and outlining past scholarship on the text.

⁹ As one would anticipate, Narsai invokes the figure of Mary at several points, but his treatment of her remains largely confined to her significance for Christological debates. Failing to dramatize Mary, Narsai renders her a theological "reference point" rather than a vivid character through extended speech and description. Given the scope of the current article, I have set aside *Mēmṛā 5 'On the Virgin Mary'* (unedited) and *Mēmṛā 27 'On the Parable of the Ten Virgins'* (ed. Minana 1.243–256 and Siman 6–22). Eve's role is downplayed in *Mēmṛā 49 'On Creation IV'* (ed. Mingana 2.100–113). Within these *mēmṛē*, female figures are prominent reference points within his theological reflection, but they do not acquire the expansive psychological portraits that we see in *Mēmṛā 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'*.

¹⁰ While purportedly surviving in four manuscripts, only two are currently available for examination (see Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 275–280). Fortunately, this particular *mēmṛā* survives in the second-oldest surviving manuscript for Narsai's poetry, ms. Diyarbakir 70. This manuscript, copied near Erbil (in modern-day Iraq) in 1328, contains 38 *mēmṛē*, 35 of which belong to Narsai. Examining the manuscript in 1907, Addai Scher observed that the arrangement of the *mēmṛē* followed the liturgical year of Sundays and feast days (A. Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché chaldéen de Diarbékir," *JA* 10.1 [1907]: 361–362). While this manuscript served as the base text for my edition, I included variants from ms. Vatican Syriac 594. This manuscript was copied in 1918, by a Syrian Orthodox deacon in Mosul for a priest from Diyarbakir, a city in southeastern Turkey. There are two manuscripts attributed to the nineteenth-century, mss. 70

Through similar narrative themes and attendant imagery, Narsai constructs the Canaanite woman as a near inverse of Eve, directing our attention consistently to the agency and bodily condition of both women. If female depravity and idealized virtue may be mapped onto the binary of Eve and the Virgin Mary, Narsai's Canaanite woman becomes a third reference point for Christians in the midst of their own struggles with sin and spiritual weakness. Expanding the typological binary, Narsai's reflection on gender triangulates between these three figures. Through first examining the introductions to both *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' and *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman', I will show how female embodiment is a vehicle for thinking through the implications of a disembodied evil "adversary." Throughout these poems humans are alternatively rendered willing participants in Satan's schemes and passive victims of his cruelty. Narsai uses the imagery of adultery and the vocabulary of sexual slander to render Eve the seductive accomplice of Satan, and the consequences of her speech and action are felt throughout the generations. His choice of female protagonists refracts the embattled human condition through the societal complexities of gender and sexual relationships.

Narsai departs from his vitriolic depiction of Eve in *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' to craft the Canaanite woman as a discerning character in an eponymous *mēmṛā*. He draws particular attention to her voice and faithful disposition while attenuating her gender identity through fewer invocations of the body. Departing from familiar Christian readings of the Canaanite woman as a figure for the "Church of the Gentiles," Narsai describes her as a slave and a "daughter of Ham."¹¹ This interpretative turn conditions our understanding of her bodily defilement and underscores the extraordinary character of her speech. For Narsai, because the woman and her daughter experience the consequences of their descent within their bodies, they mirror the scourges of inherited sin for all humanity. The rhetoric of kinship reinforces the urgency of Narsai's message and reminds the listener of their inherited sinful state.

and 240 belonging to the Chaldean Patriarchate in Baghdad, which are currently inaccessible to modern scholars and possibly destroyed in the midst of the violence that has consumed the region in recent history. We do know that the contents of these manuscripts follow the ordering of our oldest and primary manuscript for this *mēmṛā*, ms. Diyarbakir 70. Macomber argued that nineteenth-century scribes used ms. Diyarbakir 70 as their source text (Macomber, "The Manuscripts of the Metrical Homilies of Narsai," 287–288). The paucity of variants between the Diyarbakir codex and the Vatican manuscript allows for a certain degree of confidence in a relatively stable transmission history of *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' as well as its attribution to Narsai as its author. I will refer to the oldest extant manuscript, ms. Diyarbakir 70, ff. 204r–212r. This manuscript may be found at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library under Chaldean Cathedral (Mardin) 578.

¹¹ See Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew*, 15.4 (ed. and trans. J. Doignon, *Hilaire de Poitiers. Sur Matthieu* [SC 254, 258; Paris: Cerf, 1978–1979], 38); Augustine, *Sermon*, 77.2 (ed. PL 38.483; trans. NPNF 1.6.342–343); Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragment* 83 (ed. J. Reuss, *Matthäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche* [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1967], 126–127).

After examining how Narsai invokes and deploys corporeal imagery, we will turn to the role of language and its embodied expression. Through speech, the "poetic" Canaanite woman not only reveals her spiritual and interpretative acuity, but she also exercises her agency within the marginalized social position she occupies. Rather than reading Narsai's depiction of the Canaanite woman as either an instance of female liberation within a male-authored text or as a mere mouthpiece for patriarchal ideology, I argue that through this female figure Narsai imagines a form of self-actualizing agency. Defying the familiar categories of female docility and resistance, the "poetic" Canaanite woman transgresses the norms of custom and tradition while pursuing her spiritual ends in relationship with God.¹² Neither rejecting outright nor overturning systems of power, Narsai's Canaanite woman emerges as a nuanced representation of a woman who engages male authority in order to mitigate her physical and spiritual suffering. In contradistinction to Eve who misused her power of speech, the "poetic" Canaanite woman achieves her aims through the skillful use of her voice. In narrating the stories of Eve and the Canaanite woman, Narsai reflects on the dangers and possibilities of female agency and embodiment, foregrounding the potency of female speech and the linguistic economy of the Incarnation. For Narsai, the initiative of the Canaanite woman is worthy of emulation.

Disappearing Eve: Alternative Accounts of the "Fall" in Narsai

Either through direct reference to the events of the Garden of Eden or by more abstract rehearsal of Satan's machinations against humanity, Narsai contextualizes the sinful condition of humanity within a cosmic struggle for the integrity of creation. In both *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' and *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman', Narsai includes a lengthy introduction delineating the "fall" of humanity through sin and the machinations of a colorfully depicted Satan. If we begin with examining *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', the contrast with the loosely biblical account of *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' becomes more apparent.

In *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', Narsai participates in the Late Antique discourse of gender and sexuality. Like many Christian authors, Narsai

¹² S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9: "Equally important is the question that follows: does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power – a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?" Mahmood problematizes western feminist understandings of agency and assertion of will, breaking open the binary of liberation or internalization of patriarchal norms. This poetry, penned and performed by males, raises further questions of how the behavior and agency of characters performed within the liturgy "maps onto" communal expectations concerning gender.

uses the Genesis account to contextualize and naturalize patriarchal social structures.¹³ The narrative of Eve's encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden never reappears within the books that eventually formed the "canonical" Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.¹⁴ Nevertheless, early Christian writers employed it repeatedly as justification for circumscribing women's actions.¹⁵ Christian interpreters continually explored the numerous angles and seemingly limitless possibilities for naturalizing gender hierarchies and constructing their social realities through its fateful narrative.¹⁶

Early Christians assumed that the gender binary of male and female, viewed as coterminous with biological sexual difference, was foundational for structuring the natural world and human society. Social categories inform the etiology of human sin and frailty. Eve, reviled and lambasted for her actions, became a lens for examining the actions and character of all subsequent women.¹⁷ Within this context, Narsai's depiction of feminine wiles and his overt misogyny play upon familiar tropes and gendered stereotypes.¹⁸ Replete with stereotypical statements about the vices of women, along with its depiction of Eve as Satan's willing and eager collaborator in wickedness, *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* revels in misogynist tropes familiar to scholars of classical and Late Antique literature, a seemingly definitive statement of the author's hostility toward women.¹⁹

In *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*, the two significant moments within the Genesis narrative are Eve's generation and her acquiescence to the serpent's

¹³ See E.A. Clark, "Devil's Gateway and Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 24–31; eadem, "Heresy, Asceticism, Adam and Eve: Interpretations of Genesis 1–3 in the Later Latin Fathers," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, 353–385.

¹⁴ C. Meyers, "Eve," in C. Meyers, T. Craven, and R.S. Kraemer (eds.), *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 79–82.

¹⁵ Clark, "Devil's Gateway and the Bride of Christ," 30.

¹⁶ P. Norris, *Eve: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); J.A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984); L.L. Bonner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 22–41; A. Kowalski, "'Rivestiti di gloria': Adam ed Eva nel commento di sant' Efrem a Gen 2,25: Ricerca sulle fonti dell'esegesi siriana," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 3 (1982): 41–60; N.V. Harrison, "Eve in Greek Patristic and Byzantine Theology," in B. Neil, G. Dunn, and L. Cross (eds.), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 3 *Liturgy and Life* (Strathfield: St. Pauls Publications, 2003), 293–314; L. Van Rompay, "Memories of Paradise: The Greek 'Life of Adam and Eve' and Early Syriac Tradition," *ARAM* 5 (1993): 555–570.

¹⁷ For an excellent overview of this theme within Syriac literature, see S. Minov, "'Serpentine' Eve in Syriac Christian Literature of Late Antiquity," in D.V. Arbel and A.A. Orlov (ed.), *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elior* (Ekstasis 2; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 92–114.

¹⁸ Cf. Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* (ed. W.A.R. von Harnack, G. Wissowa, et al., *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* [CSEL 70; Vindobonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1890–1957], vol. 4 [CSEL 70], 59).

¹⁹ Harvey, "Encountering Eve in the Syriac Liturgy," 13–14.

suggestion to eat the forbidden fruit (Gn 3:1–8). Narsai spends little time reflecting on the pre-lapsarian condition of humanity. Setting the agenda for the rest of his text, Narsai invokes the words of Genesis 2:23, foregrounding the potential equality of the sexes and embedding the bond between Adam and Eve within a shared human flesh:

Flesh of my flesh (Gn 2:23) Adam also called her in prophecy,
But she belied the prophecy by lack of equality.
Woman he called her, in order that everyone would call her by that name of equality,
But she disrupted the peace of humanity by her contention.²⁰

Here we see the same term employed twice in relation to Eve's original creation: *šawyuṭā* "balance" or better yet, "equality." The verbal root *šwā* can be translated as "to be worthy; to merit; to be equal." For the Syriac-speaker, the repetition of the phonologically-similar, abstract nouns for "prophecy (*nḥiyuṭā*)," "equality (*šawyuṭā*)," and "contention (*ḥeryāyuṭā*)," each with the abstract ending *-uṭā*, rhythmically underscores the intended (but never realized) pre-hierarchical state. While briefly suggesting Eve's nascent potential, Narsai gives little weight to these initial prophecies and overtures of Adam. Within these same lines Narsai places Eve at the root of humanity's troubles, a story of humanity unambiguously narrated from the male perspective.

Narsai's reproach of Eve moves well beyond the confines of the Genesis narrative. He lambasts her complicity with Satan while depicting her body as a weapon for a disembodied evil force. *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' constructs a portrait of humanity's "fall" through the imagery of bodily violence, entrapment, and disintegration, often colored with sexual overtones and gendered rhetoric. The weakness of Eve is foregrounded as the catalyst for transforming the divine command from life-giving to death-dealing: "Full of life was this command the creator imposed, but by her 'weakness' (*raḥyūṭā*) she made it the spring that sheds forth death."²¹ As we shall see, Narsai applies this same term for "weakness" to the Canaanite woman ironically as he lauds her victory over Satan. Linking this New Testament female exemplar to her foremother, Narsai reminds the Christian listener that this gendered deficiency is simultaneously universal and surmountable.

Narsai attempts to identify the root of this universal condition within the first agents of destruction: Eve and Satan. One familiar with both *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' and *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' will soon hear echoes between the epithets and descriptors of both characters, forging links between poems. Within the same introductory lines of *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', Narsai laments that a "a lack of balance (*šawyuṭā*) manifested

²⁰ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.353.4–7; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76 [translation altered]).

²¹ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.353.8–9; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76).

itself in her from the beginning and bitterness (*marrirūtā*) her thoughts bore and her heart brought forth.”²² Narsai repeatedly attributes the trait of bitterness (*marrirūtā*) to Satan in *Mēmra* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’: “He troubled them with the ugly filth of his bitterness.”²³ Traits initially ascribed to Eve in *Mēmra* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ are attributed to Satan alone in *Mēmra* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’, removing Eve from the dramatic staging of the poem.

Untroubled by the implications of Eve’s initially flawed nature for the goodness of creation, Narsai vacillates between the spiritual shortcomings of Eve and her problematic embodied existence. Women’s bodies, defiled through their wickedness as in the case of Eve or through idolatry as with the Canaanite woman, reflect their stage of spiritual ascent or degradation. At the same time, these bodies participate in a violent environment, and interpersonal relationships form the increasingly complex social webs of sin and violence.

Eschewing the cosmic scope that we encounter in *Mēmra* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’, Narsai focuses his audience’s attention on the fateful alliance of Eve and Satan in *Mēmra* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’. Indeed it is Eve’s physical attractiveness that first brought Satan “running” to her: “Through the visible senses the accuser committed adultery with her but his seed reached into her soul and settled itself therein.”²⁴ Using the explicit language of adultery and fornication, Narsai lends their relationship a perverse eroticism. Nevertheless, Narsai avoids a crass materialism by positing that Satan’s “seed” was placed within her soul. His theological anthropology maintains a union of soul and body within the very same verse; the respective deficiencies of body and soul interpenetrate and mutually reinforce a degraded human condition.

Using sexual imagery throughout these verses, Narsai renders Eve both an active and passive partner in these encounters. Described as the “wilfull one” (*marrāḥtā*), Eve wishes to assert herself “above her husband” (*l’el men ba’lāh*).²⁵ Female self-assertion, implicated in the disruption of societal order for Narsai, is symptomatic of Eve’s nature.²⁶ Rather than fulfilling her role as the “royal bride” to Adam, Eve submits to the pernicious will of humanity’s “adversary”:

With his advice she complied from the beginning to the present,
and her heart did not part from the intimacy with his foul deeds.

²² *Mēmra* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.353.11–12; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 76).

²³ *Mēmra* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.17).

²⁴ *Mēmra* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.353.15–16; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 76).

²⁵ *Mēmra* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.354.3; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 76).

²⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 11:3.

A bad agreement, which puts humanity to death, she made with him,
but she does not wish to abandon him until the end.²⁷

Repeatedly through these opening verses Narsai underscores the untoward camaraderie between Eve and Satan. As she cultivates this relationship, conforming her will and engaging in illicit contact, Eve both exercises agency and relinquishes control. Misplaced submissiveness and impudence entangle her. Dissolving the boundaries between biblical history and his own context, Narsai extends the consequences of her recklessness to the present. Eve's ill-advised devotion binds all humanity to a common fate.

Turning from the relationship of Eve and Satan to the dangers of feminine seduction throughout history, Narsai portrays men as vulnerable to her relentless assaults. It is this weakness that Satan seizes upon to achieve his aims of chaos and destruction. Seemingly addressing a male audience, Narsai warns that the unsuspecting may fall victim to enticements of a woman, identified here as a "weak rib" (*el'ā rṣitā*).²⁸ These verses are punctuated with the term for "man" (*gaḥrā*) and the language of "courage" (*ga[n]bbārā*). Before speaking of her physical allure, Narsai foregrounds the danger of verbal intercourse:

Sweet are her words for the one who does not know her bitterness,
And pleasant is her conversation for the one who does not see her insipidness.
Beautiful is her appearance for the one who does not examine the deceit of her heart,
And meeting with her is desirable for the one who has not examined her passions.²⁹

Once again Narsai reminds us of the bitterness which lies at the root of both Eve and Satan's actions. In the following lines Narsai imputes lustful bodily cravings and insatiable sexual urges to her nature, characterizing her as a "lioness" whose claws "could not cling onto the chaste body."³⁰ Recalling his semi-monastic, academic setting, one detects the ascetic tone of his characterization of Eve's lack of restraint: "She is very weak (*rṣitā*) in fighting against her desires, therefore she succumbs and makes us guilty by her defeat."³¹ Echoing the vocabulary used for the "weak rib," Narsai consistently draws the listener's attention to this fundamental flaw. Whether this poem was recited before a mixed congregation of men and women or within the all-male environs of the School of Edessa

²⁷ *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.354.6–8; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 77).

²⁸ *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.358.18–19; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 81 [translation altered]): "Behold, what a weak rib accomplished in a courageous one; Let every man say to his fellow man, 'Beware of Eve!'"

²⁹ *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.358.24–359.3; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 81 [translation altered]).

³⁰ *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.360.12–13; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 82 [translation altered]): "As a lioness the foolish one attacked the holy one, but her licentious claws could not cling to a chaste body."

³¹ *Mēmra 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.359.13–15; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 82 [translation altered]).

(or Nisibis), they are punctuated by repeated admonitions. Narsai exhorts his audience to the ever-present threat of the diffuse consequences of Eve's actions.

Eve's adultery, involving both mind and body, renders both vulnerable and vitiate.³² Through her limbs and the adornment of her face, Eve lends Satan the "traps" and "snares" with which to hinder man's spiritual ascent. Here we see how the union of female corporeality with disembodied evil operates:

From her he learned the various kinds of evil and subsequently he did evil,
and he used her as a weapon (*zaynā*) against the truth.
He put on her armor/weaponry (*zaynā*) in the battle against Joseph,
and in her limbs he made war with Joseph's chastity.
With a hand of flesh the spiritual one grasped the corporeal one,
but the hand of flesh and spirit missed the fleshly one.³³

Inverting the relationship between Eve and Satan, Narsai here depicts Eve as an eager participant while also conflating her with Potiphar's wife (Gn 39). The term for "flesh" (*besrā*) hearkens back to the opening verses derived from the Genesis account: "flesh of my flesh."³⁴ Joseph is likewise referred to through his bodily nature: the "corporeal one" and the "fleshly one." Satan assumes what belongs to humanity, namely female flesh, to wage war upon Joseph. As Narsai reminds us through the story of Joseph, such machinations are futile against the chaste and the righteous. Rather than identifying women alone with the body, Narsai opposes the impotent disembodied spirit against corporeal existence.

The instrumentality of Eve's body renders her a "weapon" (*zaynā*) both wielded and worn within these verses.³⁵ Such lines reflect overarching themes within the imagery of both *mēmṛē*: war, entrapment, and conflict. Whereas Jacob (and Ephrem) rely heavily on medicinal imagery, Narsai employs the language of weaponry and hunting extensively.³⁶ The peace of the initial creation disintegrates as Satan sows discord among humanity, and his agency (along with the intermittent activity of Eve) is central to the proliferation of sin and chaos. Violence and conflict define post-lapsarian society. Just as the language of healing draws attention to embodied existence, violence centers on the body and its abuse. For Narsai the chief architects of violence are the Evil One and his ac-

³² Cf. *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.353.15–16; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76).

³³ *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.360.6–10; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 82 [translation altered]).

³⁴ *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.353.4; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76).

³⁵ The language of armor is also a perverse rendering of the Incarnation: Jesus assumes the human body versus Satan's assumption of the female body.

³⁶ R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975; 2nd ed.; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2004), 89–91, 199–203.

complice, Eve. As he writes in the opening verses of *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women':

The cause of death and the companion of the Evil One
she was (from the very moment) she came into being,
and from her limbs sprang up
snares and nets for us.³⁷

This damning portrait of Eve depicts Satan's influence as transforming Eve's body into an arsenal of weapons, setting in motion the fracturing of human society. It also calls into question Eve's agency by rendering her a passive instrument. The invocation of the first person plural ("for us") alerts the listeners that the biblical and mythical past is contiguous with the present moment.

Scholars of hagiography and asceticism have frequently explored the expressive and disruptive qualities of female bodies, embodied presences "heavy" with symbolic meaning.³⁸ The female body within these poems serves as the material means for Satan's aggression and the site for spiritual testing. The body, however, is never isolated from the spiritual and intellectual qualities of the individual. Narsai moves seamlessly between discussions of the inner self and descriptions of bodily degradation. Employing erotic and potentially explicit language, Narsai presses conceptual and linguistic boundaries within his poetry. Returning to the betrayal of Eve and her interaction with Satan, Narsai repeatedly conflates sexual encounter with verbal exchange, but he twists the imagery to bring bodily and spiritual corruption together:

Through hearing she committed adultery,
the royal bride, Adam's betrothed;
and her wedding-day had not yet come
when she conceived iniquity.³⁹

The physical senses, specifically the sense of hearing, are surmounted by the assault of the Adversary, and the corruption of her mind demonstrates the psychosomatic quality of sin. Created as a "beautiful dwelling," Eve's wayward actions deform her soul in the eyes of God, men, and angels.⁴⁰ Narsai plays with the

³⁷ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.353.9–11; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76).

³⁸ See, for example, V. Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *JFSR* 10 (1994): 45–51; eadem, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); P.C. Miller, "Is there a Harlot in this Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," in Martin and Miller (eds.), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies*, 87–102; S. Constantinou, "Grotesque Bodies in Hagiographical Tales: The Monstrous and the Uncanny in Byzantine Collections of Miracle Stories," *DOP* 64 (2010): 43–54.

³⁹ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.353.16–17; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76).

⁴⁰ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.354.22; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 77).

mirror image of Mary conceiving through her ear, a trope favored by his predecessor, Ephrem.⁴¹

The insemination of Eve's soul and the attendant degradation of her actions underscore a central metaphor for Narsai's anthropology: dwelling. Spatial reasoning compounds Narsai's overarching point that Eve is a willing participant in Satan's plots. Whereas earlier we saw Eve violating the exclusivity of her marital union with Adam through consorting with Satan, here we see her occupation through a related lens. The impious seed's dwelling within her soul become a physical marker of Satan's totalizing control. *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' reminds us that "The Evil One dwells in her and stays in her continuously and he does not give truth (*quštā*) an opportunity to enter her."⁴² Likewise, the plight of the Canaanite Woman over the demonic possession of her daughter gains its power from this conception of indwelling. Narsai suggests that not only the woman's daughter but even the woman herself has been defiled and occupied by demons.⁴³ He extends and projects this lack of bodily integrity to all Canaanites as a result of their erroneous religious practice. The Canaanite Woman and her daughter offer a vision of restoration as they are healed through the deposit of a holy seed:

The medicine of life He threw into her soul like a seed,
and the fruit of faith blossomed within her mind.
She came to life from the death of the demon's destruction, she and her daughter,
and she donned the garment of incorruptible faith.⁴⁴

One hears the echo of Ephrem in the phrase "medicine of life," and Jesus' action alters the quality of the Canaanite woman's mind. Inverting the imagery of Satan's corruption of Eve in *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', Narsai links the Canaanite woman's recovery to her foremother's sin in *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'. This transmuted eroticism, along with the lack of detail about the bodily appearance of these characters, presents to the audience a poetic body that performs gender with subtlety, evoking and undermining physicality. The slippage between the mind and the body between verses prevents one from dwelling on the body without continually being aware of its relationship to the activities of the soul.

Expanding the Genesis narrative, Narsai casts Satan and Eve as co-conspirators in Adam's downfall, ascribing them in turns equal agency in *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the

⁴¹ Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 76 fn. 67. See also Muehlberger's contribution to this volume (pp. 175–185).

⁴² *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.354.19–20; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 77).

⁴³ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.11–13): "Who revealed to the worshipper of demons, who had been defiled by the demons, that at the voice of Jesus demons flee from their dwelling places?"

⁴⁴ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 211r.7–11).

Reproof of Women. Narsai sets the encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman within the cosmological frame of humanity's struggles against sin and its chief architect: Satan. The very first words of the poem invoke this menace, "the Hater of people." If the body of Eve was central to Narsai's retelling of Genesis, humanity's enemy in *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*' is disembodied. While lacking definitive physical form, the "Rebel" devises noetic plots for humanity's demise: "His thoughts wove skillfully a net of iniquity, so that it may seize and hold the prey of humanity within its womb."⁴⁵ Maintaining control over the language of material body and the immaterial cognition, Narsai introduces this unmistakably female imagery of the womb, a fecund metaphor for his poetic precursor, Ephrem. As a ubiquitous and multivalent image within his poetry, the female womb stands as a corporeal image for potentiality and capaciousness.

Despite a lack of bodily form, the adversary is bent on causing pain and suffering for embodied beings. Narsai reminds us that the resourceful Satan is not dependent on Eve's body alone. Described as "intoxicated" by his envy for humanity, this adversary is said to "clothe himself with the zeal of anger" invoking a familiar Syriac image for Jesus donning humanity in the Incarnation.⁴⁶ The body within the Canaanite woman lacks the seductive qualities of Eve. Narsai's description is at times clinical and passionless. The first corporeal substance mentioned in *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*' is blood:

With plots he sharpened his blade to shed their blood.

With all shapes he prepared himself for battle,

So that he might fulfill the inclination (*yaṣrā*) of his bitterness by means of their death.⁴⁷

Narsai prepares his audience to hear the New Testament pericope through a vivid description of humanity's besieged plight. This amorphous opponent poses a credible threat that must be skillfully countered through acquiring spiritual strength and powers of discernment. The poet acts as a guide and a trainer, equipping the individual through the gradual formation of an awakened subjectivity. While the gender of Eve is frequently invoked in *Mēmṛā* 80 '*On the Reproof of Women*', the bodies and limbs have no gender markings. The tone and rhetorical structure center on Satan's activity, crafting this character into a chilling nemesis.

According to both poems, humans occupy a precarious position. Weakened by sin and beleaguered by demonic forces, humanity struggles blindly against enemies that threaten to destroy it. Humans, and in particular the Canaanite woman, are embodied souls locked in battle with cosmic forces bent on their destruction. In *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*', Narsai describes post-lapsarian community as defined by violence and dehumanization:

⁴⁵ *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.25–26).

⁴⁶ *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.18).

⁴⁷ *Mēmṛā* 32 '*On the Canaanite Woman*' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.20–23).

They destroyed one another as strangers, and they did not understand;
and they tore to pieces the bodies of their limbs as if (they were) not people.
He taught them (all) sorts of conflict according to his bitterness,
and he instructed them how to attack savagely.⁴⁸

Throughout his *mēmṛā* Narsai alternates between fragmented and whole bodies. This begins within the introduction itself as the poet recounts Satan compelling humans to fight within one another through sowing discord within their thoughts. Within these lines Narsai offers a somber view of humanity's state. Any sense of solidarity is absent amidst turmoil and ignorance, leading to a frenzied picture of destruction and dehumanizing violence.

The embodiment of defilement and centrality of the body to restoration foreground corporeal language. Nevertheless, Narsai often describes these bodies obliquely. While Narsai speaks briefly of Eve's beauty and her coloring, he provides little visual description of the Canaanite Woman. His only description of her body relies on a reading of the term "Canaanite" through the text of Genesis, linking her to the enslavement of Ham through the curse of Noah. In a threefold litany of questions, Narsai underscores her biblical lineage:

Who taught the daughter of Canaan, the slave of slaves,
To go out and ask for freedom from the son of Abram?
Who revealed to the Canaanite woman, the daughter of Ham, the accursed one,
That the son of Shem is able to break the seal, giving her access to the righteous one?
Who revealed to the worshiper of demons, who had been defiled by the demons,
That at the voice of Jesus demons flee from their dwelling places?⁴⁹

In the biblical account the woman's daughter is in jeopardy due to the acts of demons, but here Narsai goes beyond the biblical text to depict the woman herself as endangered. As a daughter of Eve, this woman bears the burden of sin. This dual identity as both a mother and an afflicted sinner lends the Canaanite woman further pathos while allowing her to speak from her own experience of suffering and demonic oppression. As the poet invites us to marvel at her extraordinary speech and introduces the demonstration of her faith that follows, he actively characterizes the woman as occupying an oppressed and marginal social position. The implications of being a "daughter of Canaan" are made clear through the parallelism a few lines down, "a worshiper of demons." Drawing out the consequences of idolatry, Narsai claims that the woman's own body is defiled, foregrounding her corporeality. While the biblical narrative claims that the impetus for her approach was the welfare of her daughter, Narsai focuses our attention squarely on the woman herself. We are told that her mouth becomes an "advocate before the judge," pleading with Jesus to alleviate her condition. She puts forward a plea for her community, describing them as a people exhausted

⁴⁸ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204v.9–12).

⁴⁹ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.7–13).

from the punishment of their forbearers as the woman explains "Enough has the iniquitous tyrant subjected the freedom of our souls."⁵⁰

We will return to the imagery of slavery when we examine the speech of the Canaanite woman, but it is important to note that most often she is depicted metonymically by her limbs or mouth. The poetic body is the barest of outlines, lacking specific details. Indeed the Canaanite Woman's body is most often depicted as being in motion:

Her thoughts along with her limbs prepared themselves to go after Jesus;
and her emotions/stirrings and senses began to aim at this goal of (Jesus') name.⁵¹

And a few lines later:

Her mind put on faith as a breastplate,
And she grasped hope as a shield by means of (her) emotions.
At the goal of love her thoughts aimed along with her limbs ...⁵²

Body and intellect move jointly towards the goal of one's love, and the emotions have a locomotive quality. When rehearsing the Canaanite Woman's victory, Narsai returns to this vocabulary to extol the woman's discernment, for "there is no bird whose wing is swift compared to your emotions."⁵³ The kinetic quality of body and emotions render Narsai's vision of the spiritual life as vigorous, demanding strength and endurance. One could translate this word as "emotions" or "stirrings" to emphasize the movement and unrest they cause.

The continuity between the imagery is striking in *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman', but Satan streamlines his production of arms:

His thoughts wove skillfully a net of iniquity,
So that it may seize and hold the prey of humankind within its womb.⁵⁴

As recounted in *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman', the noetic tools of Satan are central, shifting attention away from the physicality of temptation. One familiar with the poetry of Ephrem will recognize his favored imagery of the womb. Here Narsai attaches this feminine imagery to a weapon, an inanimate tool. While the incorporeal adversary must pervert human bodies to his diabolical purposes, Eve's trickery is located in her limbs. Elsewhere Narsai invokes the body as a whole *gušmā* or *paḡrā*, but when speaking about the instrumentality of the body he favors an atomized physiological vocabulary.

Narsai's language of inner promptings and direct inspiration maintains the audience's attention on the intellectual and psychological structures that govern one's thoughts and actions. As Narsai describes the Canaanite woman, he under-

⁵⁰ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.17).

⁵¹ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.5-7).

⁵² *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.23-25).

⁵³ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 208v.3-4).

⁵⁴ *Mēmṛā* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.26-204v.1).

scores the quality of her “inclination” (*yaṣrā*): “In faith her limbs geared up in pursuit of her inclination.”⁵⁵ As Narsai recounts her victory, he reminds the listener that her “inclination” was instrumental in her success: “Wise is your heart and shrewd is your inclination (*yaṣrā*) to contend, and no one knows how to engage in battle more than you.”⁵⁶ As Adam Becker has demonstrated in his analysis of Narsai’s Lenten Homilies, the term *yaṣrā* appears frequently in conjunction with Eve and women as a way of underscoring their evil *yaṣrā* or inclination.⁵⁷ Here we see that through discernment – mental and spiritual acuity – the Canaanite Woman’s *yaṣrā* strengthens her to combat the forces that assail her. Like the Lenten Homilies examined by Becker, both *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘On the Reproof of Women’ and *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘On the Canaanite Woman’ present the individual’s spiritual ascent as bound to one’s use of their free will and application of their *yaṣrā* to propel them towards the good. The development of one’s discernment and *yaṣrā* occurs in tandem with the emotions whose movements seem bound up in this process. For the biblical text of the Canaanite Woman, the evocation of her emotions allows Narsai to attend to the pathos of the mother’s plight.

The female body, specifically Eve’s and those of her offspring, are linked in the transmission of sin and the work of redemption. Eve appears, albeit briefly in *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘On the Canaanite Woman’. While Narsai begins this *mēmṛā* with a rehearsal of humanity’s plight, these initial verses contain no direct references to Eve, relating the machinations of the Hater of Humankind instead. Eve appears in the closing verses as Narsai jubilantly sings the praises of the Canaanite Woman’s hard fought victory:

With the eating of the fruit he bound Eve who obeyed his word,
and the fruit returned from inside her limbs and trampled him on the earth.
With the weapon of fruit the guilty one triumphed and made Adam guilty,
and in the Son of Adam he was defeated and exposed, for he did not triumph.
Upon the harp of Eve he played his tunes of deathly bitterness,
and in the daughter of Eve he heard the tidings of the annulment of death.⁵⁸

Through this concatenation of verses Narsai rehearses salvation history, the legacy of Eve’s disobedience and eventual renewal in Christ. The enclosure of the female body conceals what will be revealed in time as the means of its own restoration. The “daughter of Eve” can be read as both Mary and in the immediate context of the *mēmṛā*, the Canaanite Woman herself. Using the language of musical performance (*zmr*), Narsai casts Satan as a perverse bard playing the passive Eve, a mere instrument. Without the thick characterization of Eve as

⁵⁵ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘On the Canaanite Woman’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r.7).

⁵⁶ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘On the Canaanite Woman’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 208r.26–208v.1).

⁵⁷ Becker, “The ‘Evil Inclination’ of the Jews: The Syriac *Yatṣrā* in Narsai’s Metrical Homilies for Lent,” *JQR* 106 (2016): 188–189.

⁵⁸ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘On the Canaanite Woman’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 209v.26–210r.5).

in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*, these verses express a comparatively lifeless picture of female disobedience and waywardness.

The image of the rib, the material and bodily link Genesis posits between Adam and Eve, is the first instance of bodily imagery becoming weaponized. Eve's initial creation from Adam's rib both linked Adam and Eve and also provided justification for her subordination: chronology.⁵⁹ The physical body of Eve is described as a tool and a weapon consistently in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*. The text of Gn 2:18 serves as a perfect starting point: "The *rib* who was a *helper* for the solitary Adam became a bow in the hands of the Evil One against Adam."⁶⁰ English loses the musicality of the Syriac in which the assonance and consonance of "solitary" and "hand" play upon the ear, already linked through the repetition of "Adam."

More noteworthy is the reference to the rib, a clear allusion to Genesis 2:8 and the creation of woman. As we saw earlier, the same epithet is applied to Eve in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*:

Behold what a daughter of Eve brings to pass in a son of Adam;
let anyone who meets with him warn him lest she should meet with him.
Behold, what a weak rib did in a mighty man;
(so) let man say to his fellow: "Beware of Eve!"⁶¹

The same phrase, "weak rib," is used in both *mēmṛē*, but the weakness that marks these women is as different as the consequences of their actions. While the rib makes an appearance in the text of the Canaanite Woman once, it is invoked repeatedly in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*. This purposeful example of synecdoche performs theological work for Narsai by calling our attention to the embodied existence of Eve as well as her derivation from Adam. As a woman, she is always defined by relationship – for good or ill. The rib also acts as theological shorthand for extending the vices of Eve to all women, a theme that runs throughout *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* and forms a context for understanding the typological significant of *Mēmṛā 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'*.

Narsai invokes the memory of Eve more obliquely toward the end of *Mēmṛā 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'*, as he recounts the acute despair of the demons and their leader in ways that invert and employ tropes he uses for Eve in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'*:

⁵⁹ Cf. Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis against the Manicheans* (trans. R. J. Teske, *St. Augustine. On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book* [FoC 84; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1990], 111).

⁶⁰ *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.353.2–3; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 75).

⁶¹ *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* (ed. Mingana 2.358.17–19; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 81 [translation altered]).

They saw that even a small bird, feeble of wing, broke the snare
and it flew and went beyond the fear of their injuries.
In the Canaanite Woman they saw their own downfall,
how the weak (*rḫiṭā*) rib prevailed against the might of the demons!⁶²

Characterizing the Canaanite woman as a bird, Narsai forefronts her fragility and renders her victory all the more extraordinary. The use of animal imagery allows a full set of attributes to be conveyed succinctly, drawing on cultural associations. In addition to her corporeality, Eve experiences a series of metamorphoses in *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' as she takes on the guise of a litany of animals; Narsai notes that such images convey her lack of rationality.⁶³ The Canaanite Woman as a mere bird breaks free; she escapes her attacker. To understand Narsai's use of animal natures better, one can look elsewhere in *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' where Joseph is described as a deer that eludes a daughter of Eve, namely Potiphar's wife.⁶⁴ Flighty creatures like deer and birds convey positive human attributes in Narsai, their survival predicated on their power to discern and confound rather than brute strength to dominate and control. Bodies and limbs, animal and human, are kinetic, moved by the stirrings and impulses of the soul for both good and ill.

Embodied Speech: Redemption through Language

Within Narsai's poetry, words exert power. Verbal capacity is central to his understanding of the human person. As we have seen, the Adversary joins himself to Eve through her sense of hearing, but verbal expression is central to Narsai's understanding of the Incarnation and the work of redemption as well. Study and meditation of written and spoken words form a secondary set of images within these *mēmra*. A prime example of this is found within the introduction of *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' as Narsai describes the strategy of the Adversary:

He wrote a deceitful book on the pages of their minds,
that they may read in (it) iniquitously according to his will.
He saw that they were eager to study within his books,
and he devoted himself to destroy them with unseemly things.⁶⁵

In *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', Eve is depicted as such a student:

To the desire of the flesh her mind is addicted night and day,
and her thoughts are engaged in the study of licentiousness.

⁶² *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 211v.25–212r.6).

⁶³ Cf. *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.360.12–16; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 82).

⁶⁴ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.361.11–12; trans. Molenberg, "Narsai's Memra on the Reproof," 83).

⁶⁵ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70., f. 204.13–17).

She constantly cares for the odious study of licentiousness,
but the study of spiritual life does not please her.⁶⁶

Narsai, speaking within a semi-monastic, academic setting, extends the theme of study to the spiritual life, rendering Satan a perverse tutor of vice. The language of the Christian life as one of study is found throughout Syriac literature with links to the larger Mesopotamian intellectual milieu.⁶⁷

However, the imagery of study and writing is not limited to one side of the cosmic struggle. In both *mēmṛē* God recognizes the degradation of his creation and responds with the Incarnated Word as an edifying object of study. Both *mēmṛē* refer to the Son, the Word, with the Syriac term *remzā* – related to the verb “to beckon, hint, or wink.” While I translated this term as “hint,” I like Molenberg’s translation as well: “That *wink* full of compassion had pity with (Eve’s) contemptibility and He wove a garment on her limbs and hid her shame.”⁶⁸ The Syriac language for the Incarnation’s revelatory power is a facial gesture, a divine wink. Within *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’, God’s actions and this vocabulary of his “wink” are combined with the imagery of text and writing. This language of revelation with Christological overtones enters the prologue at a pivotal moment, forming the divine response to Satan’s wickedness:

The Creator saw that the Evil One disturbed the peace of humanity,
and He sent his Hint to return people to the peace of his name.
He sent his Hint through a bodily messenger,
to convey through him the word of peace to humanity.
On the pages of his body He wrote down (the expression of) his loving will,
so that bodily beings would see what is hidden through that which is revealed.⁶⁹

These lines, punctuated with alliteration and repetition, remind the listener of the verbal nature of the Incarnation. Narsai brings together this exposition of the Incarnation with the biblical narrative of the Canaanite Woman through asking the question: How did this woman, a Canaanite and accursed daughter of Ham, come to possess such extraordinary faith? Who, as Narsai says “wrote for her a new book of the name of the creator?”⁷⁰ We do not wait long for the answer as it comes in the following: “The hidden Hint gave a sign in her mind secretly: Despise the cult of idolatry, believe and live.”⁷¹ From this inner revelation flow her

⁶⁶ *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.354.15–17; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 77).

⁶⁷ A. H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 23–30.

⁶⁸ *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.356.7–8; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 79).

⁶⁹ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 204r.25–205r.3).

⁷⁰ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.17).

⁷¹ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 205v.17–18).

discernment and the gradual healing of her mind, giving her fortitude to persist in her plea for Jesus to heal her daughter. Here we see Narsai's vision for the continual work of salvation, composing "new" books in the unfolding process of revelation. Unlike Eve who leaves no room for God's presence, the Canaanite Woman preserves her capacity for hearing and heeding revelation.

Collapsing the biblical past into the liturgical present, Syriac *mēm̄rē* and Greek *kontakia* offered an expansive re-telling of familiar stories, texturized through the layering of voices. The listener does not hear *about* the protagonists and their spiritual struggles but witnesses their transformative encounters first hand. Speech gives the audience privileged access to the emotional turmoil and gradual growth in discernment latent in the biblical text. These interpretations are not comprehensive treatments but rather crafted, intimate presentations of familiar characters.⁷²

Employing dialogue and extended soliloquies, poets offered audiences lively interpretations of biblical episodes.⁷³ Such fictive speeches are often identified with the technique of *ēthopoeia* as described in classical and Byzantine rhetorical handbooks (*progymnasmata*). This common feature of fifth- and sixth-century homiletic literature produced nuanced portrayals of familiar figures.⁷⁴ Women's voices proved a malleable rhetorical tool, and poets depicted these female characters addressing themselves in moral deliberation, disputing with the disciples, engaging Jesus, and even rebuking their own bodies and ailments. Speaking from their marginalized positions, these vociferous women raise questions about the social construction of gender within liturgical space.⁷⁵ These representations of female speech, offered within the complex discursive sphere of ecclesial-oriented poetry, existed in a dialectical relationship with expectations of female speech in the social and political realms.⁷⁶ The voices of these female

⁷² L. S. Lieber, "Portraits of Righteousness: Noah in Early Christian and Jewish Hymnography," *ZRG* 61 (2009): 354.

⁷³ J. Kecskeméti, "Deux caractéristiques de la prédication chez les prédicateurs pseudo-chrysostomiens," 24–29. Kecskeméti studies this rhetorical and exegetical strategy within the homilies of Late Antique preachers, providing key insights into the homiletic and pedagogical aims of such techniques that transcend the boundaries of genre.

⁷⁴ Brock, "Creating Women's Voices," 131.

⁷⁵ A. Purpura, "Beyond the Binary: Hymnographic Constructions of Eastern Orthodox Gender Identities," *JR* 97 (2017): 528. Purpura argues that hymnody provides a site for critiquing the cisgender binary that is often assumed within theological discussions: "In this liturgically performed and prayerfully realized voice, gendered expression has no necessary correlation to biological sex. The breaking of the cisgender binary in liturgical performance is not the equivalent to the abolishment of gender as a significant category of human experience and understanding for theological reflection altogether (one only has to look to the exclusivity of the male priesthood to see that liturgy remains very much gendered), but rather one instance of broadening of this category toward greater inclusivity in the unified voice of corporate prayer."

⁷⁶ L. McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4–5; J. Mossman, "Women's Speech in Greek Tragedy: The Case of Electra and Clytemnestra in Euripides' *Electra*," *CQ* 51 (2001): 374–375.

figures, akin to those of female ascetics and martyrs, ought to be heard against the societal background in which communal norms and constraints sought to curb women's speech.⁷⁷ And yet, the "poetic" Canaanite woman manages to elude the efforts of Narsai to tame and coerce her into a tidy exemplarity. In Narsai's re-narration, this woman speaks out of her marginalized position, adopting the terms of Jesus's dismissal and turning his argument against him through invoking the imagery of slavery and the logic of kinship.

While Narsai speaks about Eve's speech (as well as her sexualized body) as seducing members of the male sex universally, he displaces the agency of the Canaanite Woman's body onto her voice. The verbal prowess of both these women has immediate and long term consequences for themselves and their fellow humans, but the Canaanite woman's speech provides a model of redemption. I suggest that Narsai's interpretation of the Canaanite woman as enslaved – an interpretative move I have not found in any other Christian author – not only underscores her bodily vulnerability but amplifies the emotive tenor and power of her voice.

Through inverting the paradigm of Eve's impudence and complicity in the corruption of humanity, the Canaanite woman's bold self-assertion becomes an example of faithful Christian zeal. With his delicately gendered portrait of a mother desperate for aid, Narsai's depiction of the Canaanite woman contributes to the history of interpretation around her narrative and points to further avenues of research into the representations of women within his poetry.⁷⁸

Narsai's artistic style and interpretative agility defy facile attempts at generalization. While he uses common imagery and language that link the portraits of Eve and the Canaanite woman, a major difference is the endowment of speech to the New Testament figure while Eve's speech is never articulated. Eve's body and countenance are described, her study of wickedness posited, and the inner stirrings of her heart measured without us hearing her self-disclosure. Among the many warnings Narsai gives concerning the speech of Eve and her daughters, he continually calls his (male?) audience to exercise caution. Echoing the opening verses of *Mēmṛā* 80 'On the Reproof of Women', Narsai counsels his audience to better discern the bitterness belied in female speech: "Sweet are her words for the one who does not know her bitterness." Narsai never characterizes Eve through imagined speech; her words never touch his listener's ears. If the voice conveys presence, the audience is kept at a distance from her – within

⁷⁷ Clark, "Ideology, History, and the Construction of 'Woman' in Late Antique Christianity"; eadem "Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the 'Linguistic Turn'."

⁷⁸ For a fuller treatment of how Narsai and Jacob of Serugh transmit and transform Ephrem's interpretation of the text, see my forthcoming chapter, "The Creative Reception of Ephrem: The *Mēmṛā* of Narsai and Jacob of Serugh on the Canaanite Woman," in A. M. Butts and R. D. Young (eds.), *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming 2020).

the simultaneity of biblical and liturgical times, she still threatens to tempt the undiscerning. While Eve is a cipher for speaking about women in general, the Canaanite woman emerges as an individual in Narsai's work.

Hereditary Enslavement: The Embodied Voice of the Canaanite Woman

Narsai's penchant for lineages and the "rhetoric of kinship" lead him to reflect on the ancestors of the Canaanite woman who is depicted as a discerning "Daughter of Ham." In Narsai's hands, the Canaanite woman acquires extensive imaginative speech in which she recounts the "curse of Ham," a reference to the tragic events of Genesis 9:20–27, and she constructs an elegant plea for Christ to alleviate the conditions of bondage that she and her people have suffered throughout history. Narsai's treatment of bondage to sin and slavery, reckoned through the language of ethnicity and ties of kinship, contributes to broader Late Antique discourses about slavery.

Narsai engages in a form of reasoning that relies heavily on drawing upon biblical lineages for their explanatory power. Naming the forebears of a biblical figure, invoking their lineage, is not an innocent review of biblical context. Naming one's lineage is a way of framing one's present situation and future possibilities.⁷⁹ Narsai self-consciously develops the term "Canaanite" through referencing the woman's forbears, and citing Noah's curse upon Ham. Calling Jesus both "Son of David" and "Son of Abram," the Canaanite woman displays the historical memory of her people: "The father of your father cursed my fathers through the mouth of the Hidden One."⁸⁰ Agency here is dispersed. Narsai reminds us that God (the Hidden One) authorized and upheld the curse. Fore-shadowing Jesus' praise of the Canaanite woman's boldness (*ḥuṣpā*) of prayer and speech,⁸¹ she describes the transgression of her forefather as that of audacity (*marrāḥuṭā*).⁸² This inherited sin awaits the transformation of that trait of boldness through the spiritual discernment of the Canaanite woman.

In her address to Jesus, the Canaanite woman argues that the punishment inflicted by Noah has left her people, most pertinently her daughter, vulnerable to Satan's abuse. Attempting to bargain with Christ, she does not question the curse but seeks to mitigate its effects: "If the offspring of bold Ham owes the debt of slavery, let them be the slaves to the Son of the just Shem rather than to

⁷⁹ S. Franklin and S. McKinnon, "Introduction: Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies," in *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 15.

⁸⁰ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r.24).

⁸¹ Cf. *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 210r.21–22).

⁸² *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r.24–26).

the tyrant."⁸³ The Canaanite Woman never challenges the distinction between the people and the peoples, but instead pleads for a re-evaluation of what such structures signify.

Narsai's use of slave imagery for transferring her enslavement from the control of Satan to Jesus calls to mind the intertwined concepts of slavery, ethnicity, and gender within the ancient Mediterranean world.⁸⁴ Through the therapeutic use of language the woman's own voice becomes a powerful tool in her recuperation. The possessed daughter cannot speak – her voice is taken from her. Control of one's own voice is a sign of freedom. To be a slave was to be deprived of a voice. For example, in the *Phoenician Women* by Euripides, Polynices laments that in exile one does not have freedom of speech (οὐκ ἔχει παρρησίαν) to which Jocasta retorts, "Not to speak openly is a slave's life."⁸⁵ For Narsai's poetic Canaanite woman, her gender and her enslaved status should operate to silence her, and yet she speaks back.

After Jesus claims that he has come for the lost sheep of Israel and explains the impropriety of throwing the bread of children to the dogs, the Canaanite Woman takes up the identification of her people with dogs. In a lengthy monologue, Narsai's Canaanite Woman diminishes the division between the sons who are heirs to the householder and the dogs without suggesting the curse be annulled outright:

Yes, yours is the freedom of the free ones,
yet yours are also the sinners, the peaceful dogs.
Give food to the free ones as they deserve,
and let the dogs live from the crumbs of their tables.⁸⁶

Without questioning the divisions and the hierarchy within this household scene, the woman advocates for her people without completely erasing the distinction. A few lines earlier, Jesus claims that Canaanites are "voracious dogs who have not been sated with iniquity," and here the woman flatly contradicts such a characterization.⁸⁷ Where as Greek and Latin preachers praise her humility, that vocabulary is never used by Narsai. Her challenge to Jesus' self-imposed limits involves a thorough confession and praise of his divine magnanimity: "for there is no one among the created things which does not live from the treasure of your love."⁸⁸ Her modesty is equivalent with the acceptance of enduring boundaries, but the quality and condition of belonging to her own people would be changed.

⁸³ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r.5–206v.1).

⁸⁴ R. Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 196–197.

⁸⁵ For full discussion, see M. B. Dinker, *Silent Statements: Narrative Representations of Speech and Silence in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 111.

⁸⁶ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 207r.17–21).

⁸⁷ Cf. *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206v).

⁸⁸ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 207r).

While Jesus rebukes the Canaanites as “voracious dogs,” couching his censure in both ethnic and religious slurs, the woman negotiates for mutually beneficial co-existence and attempts to claim and subvert the slur Jesus employs to belittle her. Without directly alluding to verses from Paul, this identification of Jesus as the slaveholder and the religious subjectivity that the woman performs evoke 1 Corinthians and related verses.

For Narsai, as for Jacob of Serugh, the right will and love of this woman are drawn out by Jesus’ apparent hesitation, and duly rewarded: “Because you desired and longed ardently to be a lamb in the flock of my sheep; behold, I imprint the seal of my lordship on your mind.”⁸⁹ Here is one example of several verses in Narsai’s text which posits Christ’s ultimate authority over the woman, and by extension, all the faithful. Lines such as this affirm Jesus’ power over all boundaries, and Narsai confirms that love and the posture of faith are the principal criteria for belonging to the group that ultimately matters: the flock of believers. The impediments of lineage and the snares of Satan must be overcome to join that collective.

When Narsai extols his audience to imitate the virtue of the Canaanite woman, he invokes neither the presence of living women nor the laudatory exempla of other biblical women. This lack of specificity renders the context of *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ even more elusive, and no extant manuscripts appear to contain *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ and *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ together. However, one may read them as different inflections of the same theological and ascetic program – or perhaps a shift in scope best captures the difference. While the Canaanite Woman appears prominently in the *mēmṛā* dedicated to her narrative, other women fade away. Narsai exhorts his entire audience to imitate her boldness and discernment, but he does not invoke female stereotypes or speak about women generally. The Canaanite Woman transcends the limitations that both her sex and ethnicity would imply.

Setting *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ against *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ brings to light the distinction Narsai sees between spiritual tenacity and wicked impudence. Castigating Eve and her daughters, Narsai points to their boldness and overreach:

She audaciously wants to seize power over men
and to disturb the vast order of the creation.
The herald Paul, the chosen one, saw her audacity,
and in anticipation he closed the door in her face, so that she should not have power.⁹⁰

While Narsai frequently cites boldness of speech as a universal fault of women, here the core aim of female audacity is lust for power. The root *mrh* expresses

⁸⁹ *Mēmṛā* 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 209r).

⁹⁰ *Mēmṛā* 80 ‘*On the Reproof of Women*’ (ed. Mingana 2.372.4–6; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai’s Memra on the Reproof,” 85).

rashness or hastiness, and the familiar constraints of the Pauline Epistles are invoked as written in response to these proclivities. When the Canaanite Woman pleads with Jesus to manumit the slavery of her kin to Satan, a bondage incurred through the curse of Ham, she uses the same root: "Already our audacity (*marrāḥuṭā*) has been punished enough with scourges our father endured, and we became servants to the servant who rebelled against the Maker."⁹¹ This is a form of boldness that overreaches divinely established limits.

Narsai's vocabulary shifts when he speaks about the boldness of the Canaanite Woman to the words related to the root *ḥṣp*. While English allows for indeterminacy between boldness, shamelessness, and impudence, this root conveys a sense of persistence or insistence – a more positive valence than *mrḥ*. Her speech act reveals her inner disposition: "Mouth and mind alike called out with a humble voice, and she seized the boldness of invincible faith."⁹² Later on Narsai surmises that Jesus' pedagogical strategy is designed to instruct others in the ways of "holy boldness":

Not as one unwilling to heal did he turn away and remain silent,
but He (wanted) people to gain boldness when asking for mercy.
By her boldness He taught everyone to be bold in (asking for) his aid,
and not to grow weak if one does not receive (aid) quickly.⁹³

The language for zeal and boldness deserve a thorough treatment beyond the scope of the present article, but these preliminary examples demonstrate that self-assertion and agency was a subject of interest for Narsai. For both the Canaanite Woman and Eve, their speech demonstrates the nature of their boldness and by extension their spiritual state. Narsai's exhortation for his audience to emulate such zeal is never gender specific. For the Canaanite Woman, her speech not only saves her daughter, but by emulation, may save others as well.

Conclusion

Syriac poetry offers scholars a rich depository of evidence for the artistic, religious, interpretative, and ethical concerns prevalent in the formative centuries of Christianity. Unlike biblical commentaries and treatises produced and used by educated elites, poetry was performed within the liturgy, reaching Christians of various social locations and spiritual acumen.⁹⁴ Along with homilies, these compositions give us a glimpse into the pedagogical strategies of the male ecclesial

⁹¹ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r.22–23).

⁹² *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 206r).

⁹³ *Mēmra* 32 'On the Canaanite Woman' (ms. Diyarbakir 70, f. 207v.17–21).

⁹⁴ S.A. Harvey, "Bearing Witness: New Testament Women in Early Byzantine Hymnography," in D. Krueger and R.S. Nelson (eds.), *The New Testament in Byzantium* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 205. For a more general treatment,

elite.⁹⁵ Through poetic self-presentation and the attribution of psychological depth to biblical characters, liturgical poetry inculcated patterns of religious self-conception and modeled normative values.⁹⁶ These authors engaged creatively with received literary forms and interpretative traditions around biblical characters and stories, adapting previous treatments to their immediate contexts and concerns.⁹⁷

Like their Greek- and Latin-speaking counterparts, Syriac authors prescribed Christian beliefs and ethical standards for their audiences, often citing female figures as either positive exempla or deterrents.⁹⁸ Within the gendered and hierarchical space of early Christian liturgy, representations of women and feminine imagery in the scriptural readings, prayers, and poetry – as well as the visual representations of women within the sacred space – coexisted with the embodied presence of women among the congregation. The performance of stanzaic poems (*maḏrāšē*) by female choirs, so richly studied in the works of Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Kathleen McVey, is a particularly vivid example of how Syriac Christianity structured and incorporated gender difference within Christian worship.⁹⁹ To echo the insights of classical and Byzantine rhetoricians, even an imagined voice conveyed the authority of the speaker, rendering the presence

see J. Maxwell, “Popular Theology in Late Antiquity,” in L. Grig (ed.), *Popular Culture in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 277–295.

⁹⁵ P. Allen and W. Mayer, “Computer and Homily: Accessing the Everyday Life of Early Christians,” *VC* 47 (1993): 260–280. While Allen and Mayer speak only of homilies, many of their insights into gleaning information about the social realities of Christians from prose sermons have been applied to poetry as well.

⁹⁶ See Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*; J. Wickes, “The Poetics of Self-Presentation in Ephrem’s *Hymns on Faith* 10,” in M. Doerfler, K. Smith, and E. Fiano (eds.), *Syriac Encounters: Papers presented at the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, 2011* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 51–63; and especially S.A. Harvey, “Liturgy and Ethics in Ancient Syriac Christianity: Two Paradigms,” *SEC* 26 (2013): 300–316.

⁹⁷ See O. Münz-Manor, “Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach,” *JAJ* 1 (2010): 336–361. As Lieber has shown, liturgical writers adapted and changed received interpretative traditions “and not necessarily along predictable, confessional lines” (“Portraits of Righteousness,” 333).

⁹⁸ The gender of the literary protagonist is not necessarily indicative of the dominant gender identity of the audience. This disconnect has been discussed more extensively in the study of hagiography as C. Rapp has demonstrated through manuscript evidence (“Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and their Audience,” *DOP* 50 [1996]: 313–344).

⁹⁹ S.A. Harvey, “Performance as Exegesis: Women’s Liturgical Choirs in Syriac Tradition,” in B. Groen, S. Hawkes-Teeples, and S. Alexopoulos (eds.), *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship: Selected Paper of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Rome, 17–21 September 2008* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 47–64; K. McVey, “Were the Earliest *Maḏrāšē* Songs or Recitations?” in G.J. Reinink and A.C. Klugkist (eds.), *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honor of Professor Han J.W. Drijvers* (OLA 89; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 185–199; eadem, “Ephrem the Kitharode and Proponent of Women: Jacob’s Portrait of a Fourth-Century Churchman for the Sixth Century Viewer,” in S.T. Kimbrough (ed.), *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 229–253.

of female poetic characters vividly for listeners.¹⁰⁰ While dramatic homilies and poetry were neither staged nor overtly theatrical, Ephrem's audiences would hear imagined speech attributed to Mary or other female characters through the collective voices of contemporary Christian women.¹⁰¹ This sonic presence of the women within liturgies of eastern Christians is a distinct phenomenon without many parallels among Latin- and Greek-speaking believers within the formative centuries of Christianity.

As male-authored texts, these poems selectively marginalize, invoke, and silence female figures according to pedagogical and rhetorical aims. There is a reciprocal relationship between the language of these texts and the "social world of meaning" they form.¹⁰² Inhabiting the voices of these female protagonists, poets addressed their audiences through an equally crafted and intentionally gendered persona. Through the tools of feminist critique, the contemporary historian may better uncover how androcentric texts support patriarchal social structures as well as reveal the "gender politics" encoded therein.¹⁰³ The texts under analysis here do not explicitly speak about the household and the means for reproduction, but to invoke the words of Joan Kelly, these poems strengthen a social order structured in large part around the gender hierarchy, "its character and the structure of its relations order our consciousness, and it is through this consciousness that we first view and construe our world."¹⁰⁴

The occasion for the composition of these *mēmṛē* is hard to discern. Narsai's tone in *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* expresses a vexed urgency that the staid meditation of *Mēmṛā 32 'On the Canaanite Woman'* lacks. While tradition has linked *Mēmṛā 80 'On the Reproof of Women'* with Narsai's conflict with the influential wife of the archbishop of Nisibis, scholars are rightly cautious about the explanatory power of this tension. Narsai is insistent that Eve's vices

¹⁰⁰ S. Papaioannou, "Voice, Signature, Mask: The Byzantine Author," in A. Pizzone (ed.), *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature: Modes, Functions, and Identities* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 21–40. I am aware that some theorists of the voice would dispute this claim, but for further nuance on this point please see E. G. Walsh, *Sanctifying Boldness: New Testament Women in Narsai, Jacob of Serugh, and Romanos Melodos* (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 2019).

¹⁰¹ R. J. Schork, "Dramatic Dimension in Byzantine Hymns," *SP* 8 (1966): 278–279. Schork engages the work of George La Piana on the evolution of Christian dramatization of sacred history, eventually departing from some of La Piana's more speculative conclusions on the Byzantine theatre. See G. La Piana, *Le rappresentazioni sacre nella letteratura bizantina dalle origini al secolo IX, con rapporti al teatro sacro d'occidente* (Grottaferatta: Tip. italo-orientale "S. Nilo," 1912); idem, "The Byzantine Theatre," *Speculum* 11 (1936): 171–211 as well as I. Drpić, "The Patron's 'I': Art, Selfhood, and the Later Byzantine Dedicatory Epigram," *Speculum* 89 (2014): 908–911.

¹⁰² G. M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 82–83; Clark, "The Lady Vanishes," 12–13.

¹⁰³ E. S. Fiorenza, "Text and Reality – Reality as Text: The Problem of a Feminist Historical and Social Reconstruction Based on Texts," *Studia Theologica* 43 (1989): 22.

¹⁰⁴ J. Kelly, *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 15.

are found universally among women. Echoing Jerome's litanies of misbehaving women from biblical history, Narsai laments:

The heroes heard, the righteous listened,
and the knowing (ones) were amazed at Eve doing such stupendous deeds in all generations.
Joseph she imprisoned, Samson she bound, and David she persecuted,
and, behold, the examples for their distress (are to be found) in the books of the spirit.¹⁰⁵

Over the course of *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' Narsai pivots from interpreting the biblical text to exhorting his audience. Biblical time morphs into liturgical present as Narsai moves fluidly from one biblical story to another and weaves the contemporary experience of his audience into the scriptural history.

The Canaanite Woman espouses the religious zeal that Narsai extols as countering Eve's fateful abuse of agency. Narsai's depictions of women are varied and resist easy harmonization. Women – both the virtuous and the wicked – proved valuable for him to “think with” as he set forth his vision of spiritual progress. These poems depict the body simultaneously as enclosed space and fragments in motion, propelled by emotions while revealing the quality of their inclinations. The Canaanite Woman, perhaps a more approachable exemplar than Mary, provides a model of female deportment and virtue that is attainable for those whose lives bear the scars of sin and struggle. As a daughter of Eve, she persisted and prevailed.

¹⁰⁵ *Mēmra* 80 'On the Reproof of Women' (ed. Mingana 2.361.10–13; trans. Molenberg, “Narsai's Memra on the Reproof,” 83).

Where Soul Meets Body

Narsai's Depiction of the Soul-Body Relationship in Context

J. Edward Walters

Introduction

Speculation on the nature of the soul and the precise parameters of the soul-body relationship occupied no small amount of the Late Antique literary production. In particular, Christian authors of Late Antiquity contributed significantly to this body of literature, with specific works on the soul originating from Tertullian,¹ Gregory of Nyssa,² Gregory Thaumaturgus,³ Augustine,⁴ and Nemesius of Emesa.⁵ And this brief list only includes dedicated titles on the soul; it does not include the many authors who took up the topic of the soul as part of other works. The 'gnostic' corpus of Nag Hammadi, which includes texts like *Exegesis on the Soul*, provides further evidence that Christian readers were interested in the soul as a nexus of philosophical and exegetical instruction.⁶ Moreover, Chris-

¹ *De anima* (PL 2.681–798): ed. J. H. Waszink, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De anima* (Amsterdam: J. M. Meulenhoff, 1947); trans. Peter Holmes, "A Treatise on the Soul," in *ANF*, 3.181–235.

² *De anima et resurrectione* (PG 46.11–160): ed. J. G. Krabinger, *S. Gregorii Nysseni De anima et resurrectione cum sorore sua Macrina dialogus* (Leipzig: In Libreria Gustavi Wuttigii, 1837); trans. C. P. Roth, *St. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Soul and the Resurrection* (PPS 12; Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

³ *Ad Tatianum De anima* (PG 10.1137–1146). The authorship of this work is dubious, but it is attributed to Gregory. For an English translation, see S. D. F. Salmond, "On the Topic of the Soul," in *ANF*, 6.54–56.

⁴ *De anima et eius origine*: ed. K. F. Urbani and J. Zycha, *Sancti Aureli Augustini De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum ad Marcellinum libri tres; De spiritu et littera liber unus; De natura et gratia liber unus; De natura et origine animae libri quattuor; Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum libri quattuor* (CSEL 50; Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1913), 303–419; trans. R. J. Teske, *Answer to the Pelagians I* (ed. J. E. Rotelle; WSA 1.23; Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997), 465–561.

⁵ *De natura hominis*: ed. C. F. Matthaei, *Nemesius Emesensis De natura Hominis, Graece et Latine* (Halle/Magdeburg: Gebauer, 1802); trans. R. W. Sharpley and P. J. van der Eijk, *Nemesius On the Nature of Man* (TTH 49; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

⁶ *NHC II*, 6: ed. B. Layton, "The Expository Treatise on the Soul," in *The Coptic Gnostic Library: Nag Hammadi Codex II, 2–7*, vol. 2 (NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989), 144–168; trans. M. Scopello and M. Meyer, "Exegesis on the Soul," in M. Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 223–234.

tians were not the only ones engaged in this debate, as neo-platonic philosophers like Porphyry of Tyre,⁷ Plotinus,⁸ and Iamblichus of Apamea⁹ wrote significant treatises that shaped the contours of the soul-body debate in Late Antiquity.

The sprawling nature of these questions in Late Antiquity is not surprising given their deep roots in the Greek philosophical tradition. Plato's *Phaedo*, *Timaeus*, and *Phaedrus* along with Aristotle's *De Anima* were widely read, and commentaries of these works circulated in the curriculum of philosophical instruction.¹⁰ By the time a distinctly Christian intellectual tradition emerged (late second / early third century), debates on the soul had moved well beyond a simple Platonic/Aristotelian divide, as Epicureans, Stoics, and middle- and neo-platonists refined their positions dialectically. Beyond philosophical treatises, the medical writings of Galen also proved to be significant in the history of the soul-body problem in Late Antiquity, which further demonstrates the pervasiveness of this issue in the thought of ancient authors.¹¹ Thus, any author of Late Antiquity who ventured to espouse on the soul immediately stepped into a deep quagmire of sources, polemics, and debates.¹²

This is no less true of authors who wrote in Syriac than in Greek and Latin. By the time Narsai began his homiletical career in the mid-fifth century, there were already competing traditions about the soul in the nascent Syriac literary corpus. The so-called "Hymn of the Soul" (or "Hymn of the Pearl") circulated as part of the *Acts of Thomas* in Syriac,¹³ *Mēmra* 28 of the *Book of Steps* addresses the

⁷ Porphyry's primary work dealing with the soul is *On Abstinence*: trans. G. Clark, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* (London: Duckworth, 2000).

⁸ Plotinus' discussion of the soul is spread throughout the *Enneads*: ed. and trans. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus* (LCL 440–445, 468; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968–1988).

⁹ *De anima*: ed. and trans. J. F. Finamore and J. M. Dillon, *Iamblichus' De Anima* (PA 92; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁰ The most well-known of these commentaries is Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*: trans. V. Caston, *Alexander of Aphrodisias: On the Soul* (Commentators on Aristotle; New York: Bloomsbury, 2012); for a collection of other commentaries on the *anima* tradition, see R. Sorabji (ed.), *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600 AD: A Sourcebook*, vol. 1. *Psychology (with Ethics and Religion)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Galen addresses the matter of the soul in multiple works, but primarily we can point to his fragmentary *The Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixture of the Body* (QAM) [also known as *The Soul's Dependence on the Body*]: ed. I. Müller, *Claudii Galeni Pergameni scripta minora*, vol. 2. *Quod Animi Mores Corporis Temperamenta Sequantur* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893); trans. P. N. Singer, *Galen: Selected Works: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² Although it is certainly not comprehensive and is written apologetically, Nemesius of Emesa provides an incredibly useful encyclopedic history of these sources and debates as he saw them.

¹³ Ed. and trans. A. A. Bevan, *The Hymn of the Soul contained in the Syriac Acts of St. Thomas* (Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 5.3; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897).

topic of the body-soul relationship,¹⁴ and a significant portion of *Demonstration* 6 (“On the Bnay Qyama”) from the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage is dedicated to the soul-body relationship.¹⁵ Moreover, although Ephrem the Syrian did not compose any works specifically on the topic of the soul, it is a frequent subject in his hymns, particularly in the cycle known as the *Hymns on Paradise*.¹⁶ Narsai’s contemporary, Jacob of Serugh, also addressed the topic of the soul in some of his writings.¹⁷ Other than Ephrem – who was clearly directly influential on Narsai’s thought – it is not certain that Narsai was familiar with any of these previous or contemporary works dealing with the soul, but regardless of his awareness of them, Narsai’s thoughts on the soul emerge against a backdrop of these pre-existing literary traditions. Narsai’s treatment of the soul is embodied within a particular time and place; thus, we cannot do justice to the content of Narsai’s thought without also attending to the Late Antique context in which it emerges.

Narsai’s *Mēmra* ‘On the Soul’

Although the topic of the soul comes up somewhat frequently throughout Narsai’s corpus, there is one *mēmra* in particular that forms the basis of the present study: *Mēmra* 66 ‘On the Soul’.¹⁸ The full title of the work is “On the excellence of the soul and how she cares for the body, which is her home.”¹⁹ This full title provides a concise summary of the main topic Narsai addresses, namely the soul’s role in guiding and caring for the body. Utilizing classical metaphors (discussed in detail below), Narsai compares the soul to a sailor and a charioteer, steering the body to its goal. But, for Narsai, the soul also struggles to protect

¹⁴ Ed. and trans. R. A. Kitchen and M. F. G. Parmentier, *The Syriac Book of Steps* (TeCLA 12; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014), 3.168–183.

¹⁵ Ed. J. Parisot, *Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes* (PS 1.1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), 239–312; trans. A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (GECS 27; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), 169–198. I have argued elsewhere that the portion of *Dem.* 6 that deals with the topic of the soul (6.14–18) was originally an independent work that was edited together with a separate work on virginity when the corpus of the *Demonstrations* was created. See J. E. Walters, “Reconsidering the Compositional Unity of Aphrahat’s Demonstrations,” in A. M. Butts and R. D. Young (eds.), *Syriac Christian Culture: Beginnings to Renaissance* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Ed. E. Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und contra Julianum* (CSCO 174–175; Leuven: Peeters, 1957); trans. S. P. Brock, *Saint Ephrem: Hymns on Paradise* (PPS; Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990).

¹⁷ S. P. Brock, “An Acrostic Poem on the Soul by Jacob of Sarug,” *Sobornost* 23 (2001): 40–44. See also A. Golitzin, *Jacob of Sarug’s Homily on the Chariot that the Prophet Ezekiel Saw* (Metrical Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug 14; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016), 553–556.

¹⁸ Ed. Mingana 2.238–254.

¹⁹ Following the grammatical gender of Syriac, in this article I translate all pronouns referring to the soul as feminine.

the body from the dangers of bodily desires, leading the Christian ascetic's fight against the passions.

The *mēmṛā* itself is comprised of 282 couplets. The first ten couplets constitute an anaphora, with the first line of each couplet beginning with the word *reš*: "The beginning of ...". This anaphora serves as a rhetorical introduction to the primary themes of the homily.²⁰ The very first couplet sets this tone: "The beginning of wisdom is the wisdom of truth, which (is) the power of the creator / who, from nothing, created everything, hidden and revealed."²¹ This theme is significant because, although the topic of this *mēmṛā* is the body-soul relationship, Narsai constantly reminds his hearers that speculation about the composition of human existence should lead to praise of the creator. Furthermore, in the very first line following the anaphora, Narsai declares, "Everyone owes a debt of love to their fashioner."²² Thus, with an opening anaphora to set the stage, Narsai invites his hearers to contemplate their relationship to the creator as created things and to reflect on the soul-body relationship as evidence of the creator's careful design.

Narsai's Depiction of the Soul and Soul-Body Relationship in Context

There are many ways one could organize a sketch of Narsai's views on the body and soul. This is especially true since the genre of Narsai's work is a metrical homily, not a philosophical or theological treatise. Narsai is not pursuing a single argument or moving logically from one point to the next. In poetic fashion, Narsai floats from one topic to another, and he frequently returns to a topic or an image multiple times without connecting the dots of every other topic he addresses between them. So, recognizing that these categories are arbitrary and somewhat foreign to the way that Narsai presents his views, I have nonetheless organized this sketch with the following schema: 1) the origin and generation of souls, 2) the qualities of the soul, 3) the soul's responsibility within the body, 4) the fate of the soul at death, and 5) the soul/body relationship as a microcosm for theological issues.

In order to take Narsai on his own terms rather than merely derivative of previous authors, I have tried to arrange this comparative analysis by letting Narsai's descriptions of the soul lead the inquiry. That is, I do not begin with other authors' treatments of the soul to see how Narsai compares and contrasts with them; rather, I begin with Narsai, allowing his concerns to set the stage

²⁰ For more information on Narsai's use of anaphorae, see Forness' contribution to this volume (pp. 99–103).

²¹ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 1–2 (ed. Mingana 238.4–5). The first line is likely an intentional allusion to the language of Prv 9:10, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord."

²² *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 21–22 (ed. Mingana 2.238.17–18).

for the comparison. Hopefully, this arrangement will allow readers to approach Narsai as an original thinker who was clearly aware of broader philosophical trends regarding the body-soul problem, but who also felt comfortable adapting classical imagery of the body-soul relationship for his own purposes.

The Origin and Generation of Souls

Narsai's description of the origin of the soul is rooted in the exegesis of Gn 2:7: "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (NRSV). Narsai makes the connection between God's breath in the creation of Adam and the origin of the soul twice in this *mēmṛā*. In the first example, Narsai is explicit about the connection between the breath and the spirit: "First the great fashioner forms a figure of limbs / and then breathes into it the living spirit, and it becomes a soul."²³ The second example is less explicit about God's breath becoming the soul, but even here the connection is fairly clear:

It is the same command that formed Adam:

"forming the body and breathing into his face the living spirit."²⁴

He creates a living spirit within the body when it is formed,
and immortal life moves in its mortality.²⁵

Although Narsai does not provide an extended exegetical discussion of Gn 2:7, it is quite clear that he associates the origin of the soul with the breath of God.

In this exegetical conclusion, Narsai joins a chorus of early Christian and Jewish exegetes. Philo of Alexandria, for example, claims, "the soul originated from the Father and ruler of all, for that which (God) breathed into (humanity) was nothing other than Divine breath."²⁶ The author of 4 Ezra also makes this link: "(A)nd it (i. e., the dust/ground) gave to you Adam, a lifeless body. And yet, he was the work of your hands, so you breathed into him the breath of life (*ruḥā dhayyā*), and he came alive before you" (4 Ezra 3:5).²⁷ The explicit link between the soul and the breath of God is also seen quite clearly in the Targum translations of Gn 2:7. Targum Onqelos renders it thus: "And (God) breathed into

²³ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 149–150 (ed. Mingana 2.242.9–10).

²⁴ The latter part of this quote is a word for word citation of Gn 2:7 according to the Peshitta.

²⁵ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 173–176 (ed. Mingana 2.242.24–243.2).

²⁶ Philo, *On the Creation of the Cosmos*, 18.134–135 (ed. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, *Philo*, vol. 1 [LCL 226; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981], 106–107); cf. Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, I.4 (ed. R. Marcus, *Philo. Supplement I* [LCL 380; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953], 3).

²⁷ Translation in M. E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Grand Rapids: Fortress Press, 1990); text in J.A. Emerton, J.C. Lebram, and R.J. Bidawid, *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version. Sample Edition: Song of Songs; Tobit; 4 Ezra* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

(the nostrils) of his face the breath of life, and it became in Adam a spirit uttering speech.”²⁸ And Targum Ps.-Jonathan reads, “And (God) breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the breath became in the body of Adam a spirit capable of speech, to give light to the eyes and hearing to the ears.”²⁹ Finally, the midrashic interpretation of Gn 2:7 in *Bereshit Rabbah* also makes this claim even more directly: “This (i.e., ויפה באפיו) teaches that (God) set him up as a lifeless mass, reaching from earth to heaven and then infused a soul (נשמה) into him.”³⁰ These citations suggest that the explicit link between the soul and the breath of God was already well established in Jewish exegesis at an early period.

The exegetical link between God’s breath and the origin of the human soul also appears in a variety of early Christian texts, ranging from Tertullian³¹ and Irenaeus³² to “gnostic” texts.³³ Likewise, a variety of Christian authors of Late Antiquity, in both Greek and Latin, explicitly link the origin of the soul with the exegesis of Gn 2:7, including Gregory Nazianzus,³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa,³⁵ John Chrysostom,³⁶ Ambrose,³⁷ and Augustine.³⁸ More immediate to Narsai’s context, we may also consider Aphrahat, who draws a direct link between the human soul (*ruhā napšānāyā*) and the breath of God.³⁹ Given the prominence of this

²⁸ ונפח באפוהי נשמתא דחיי והות באדם לרוח ממלל (ed. M. Aberbach and B. Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis* [Hoboken: Ktav Publishing, 1982], 29; trans. B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Onkelos to Genesis* [The Aramaic Bible 6; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988], 44).

²⁹ ונפח בנחיריהי נשמתא דחיי והות נשמתא בגופא דאדם לרוח ממללא לאנהרות עינין ולמצותות אודנין (ed. E. G. Clarke et al., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance* [Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1984], 2; trans. M. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* [The Aramaic Bible 1B; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992], 22).

³⁰ *Bereshit Rabbah*, 14.8 (trans. H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah* [New York: The Soncino Press, 1983], 116).

³¹ *On the Soul*, 3.4 (ed. A. Gerlo, A. Kroymann, R. Willems, J. H. Waszink, J. G. P. Borleffs, A. Reifferscheid, G. Wissowa, E. Dekkers, J. J. Thierry, E. Evans, A. Harnack, *Tertullianus, Opera*, vol. 2 [CCSL 2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1954], 779–869).

³² *Adv. Haer.*, 5.1.3 (ed. A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau, and Ch. Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies. Livre V. Edition critique d’après les versions arménienne et latine* [SC 152–153; Paris: Cerf, 1959]).

³³ E.g., *Apocryphon of John*, II.19.22–28 (ed. M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and VI,1 with BG 8502,2* [NHMS 33; Leiden: Brill, 1995]), *Hypostasis of the Archons*, 88.3–5 (ed. B. Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7*, vol. 1 [NHS 20; Leiden: Brill, 1989]), and *Trimorphic Protennoia*, 45.28–29 (ed. B. A. Pearson, *Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X* [NHS 15; Leiden: Brill, 1981]).

³⁴ *On the Soul*, poem 1.1.8 (PG 37, 446–456).

³⁵ *On the Making of Man*, 28.1–29.1 (PG 44, 124–256).

³⁶ *Homilies on Genesis*, 12.15 (PG 53, 103); cf. *Homilies on Genesis*, 13.9.

³⁷ *On Isaac and the Soul*, 2.4 (ed. C. Schenkl, *S. Ambrosii Opera, Pars I* [CSEL 32.1; Prague: F. Tempsky, 1896]).

³⁸ *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichaeans*, 2.8.10 (PL 34.173–220).

³⁹ *Dem.* 6.14 (ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*, I.293.5–9): “For in the first birth [humans] are born with a natural spirit (*ruhā napšānāyā*) which is created within a person and is not subject to death, as it says, *The man became a living soul*” (Lehto, *Demonstrations*, 192). Although Lehto here translates the phrase *ruhā napšānāyā* as “natural spirit,” I have argued elsewhere that when Aphrahat

exegesis in both Jewish and Christian sources, particularly in the Aramaic and Syriac traditions, it is not surprising that Narsai's views of the origin of the soul are so clearly tied to the language of Gn 2:7.

Narsai's reading of Gn 2:7 may also provide the foundation for his depiction of human composition as bipartite, comprised of body and soul. For Narsai, the soul and body are intimately intertwined, to the extent that neither is complete without the other:

For it is not possible for (the soul) to do anything without (the body)
just as (the body) is nothing without (the soul).
The creator of everything constructed them as one person;
neither half of the person is complete without the other.
The soul is one half of a person to the extent that she is alive,
and her activity does not exist apart from the body.⁴⁰

Narsai does not explicitly mention any other theory of human composition, but it is clear that he stakes a claim on bipartite composition. Here, too, Narsai appears to be in concert with other early Syriac authors, who depicted humans as body and soul without a third component.⁴¹

Nemesius of Emesa also provides a helpful reference point here. In his treatise on the soul, *On the Nature of Man*, Nemesius argues in favor of a bipartite human construction.⁴² Nemesius' argument is useful because he provides examples of people who teach other theories. Namely, Nemesius credits Plotinus with distinguishing between soul ($\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$) and mind ($\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$), which produces a tripartite division. Furthermore, Nemesius argues that Apollinaris of Laodicea follows Plotinus in this regard, which then becomes the basis for his Christological claims regarding Christ's mind. The fact that Nemesius argues in favor of bipartite human composition as an explicitly anti-Apollinarian argument provides some extra context for Narsai's claims, given that Apollinaris' arguments regarding Christ's divinity were so contemptible among the Antiochene exegetes.

Narsai also employs the exegesis of Gn 2:7 as the basis for his claims about the generation of souls following the initial creation of the soul in Adam. Narsai

uses this phrase, he is simply referring to the soul; see "Sleep of the Soul and Resurrection of the Body: Aphrahat's Anthropology in Context," *Hugoye* 22 (2019): 433–465.

⁴⁰ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 487–492 (ed. Mingana 2.251.19–23).

⁴¹ Cf. Aphrahat, *Dem.* 6.14–19 (ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*); see also *Book of Steps*, *Mēmra* 29, 1: "According to the nature of his creation, a person is body and soul only" (Kitchen and Parmentier, *The Syriac Book of Steps*, 158). Note that both Aphrahat and the *Book of Steps* speak of the spirit as something that indwells people from God, but it is clearly not a third component of human composition.

⁴² *On the Nature of Man*, I.1 (ed. M. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni De natura hominis* [Bibliotheca scriptorium Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana; Leipzig: Teubner, 1987]; trans. W. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa* [Library of Christian Classics; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1955], 224–226); this argument is, in fact, the starting place of Nemesius' treatment of the soul.

highlights the order of events in God's creation of humanity: "First, the Divine Will composed a body in the formation of humanity / and after a time, he formed a soul and deposited it within (the body)."⁴³ This order, then, is re-enacted with every human being. First a body is created, and then it is imbued with a soul:

Her construction was after the body in the construction of Adam,
and this same order continues every day in her and the body.
First the great fashioner forms a figure of limbs,
and then breathes into it the living spirit, and it becomes a soul.
He wove a garment of flesh with a spiritual hand,
and then laid it over the soul like purple garments.
In the darkness he constructs the body and creates the soul,
just as when he created creation and placed it in the darkness.

...

The greatness of his power is constantly proclaimed in the fashioning of us,
within the formation of the body and soul, which happens every day.⁴⁴

Narsai thus makes it very clear that the order (*ṭaksā*) of Adam's creation is a pattern that is repeated for every human being. In fact, this is a sign of God's ongoing work in the world: a miracle that humans witness in everyday life, a re-enactment of creation in every impregnated womb.

Moreover, Narsai argues in favor of *creatio ex nihilo* for each and every soul: "Her nature comes into being from nothing / insofar as she is similar to angels and spiritual beings,"⁴⁵ and further: "The spiritual beings came into being from nothing; in the beginning, they came into being / and from nothing their existence arises in all generations."⁴⁶ In other words, by comparing souls explicitly to "spiritual beings," Narsai appears to argue that the creation of the soul in every single human being is a unique creative moment. Thus, while Narsai does not explicitly bring up this topic, his argument appears to preclude the possibility of pre-existent souls.

Narsai distinguishes between the ongoing generation of bodies and souls thus: Bodies can reproduce themselves; souls cannot. This is, in fact, by design. Narsai tells us that when God constructed the body, God placed within that body a seed with the purpose of reproducing other bodies, but the soul has no such seed:

Like a foundation, he put a seed in the inner part of the body,
and he moved it forward gradually, like a building, unto completion.
The seed became matter for the body, and then it came into existence,
and from that body sprouted (another) body that resembles the (first) body.
As for the soul, it does not have a seed that sprouts forth another (soul),
and it is not in her matter that her nature sprouts within (its) limbs.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 127–128 (ed. Mingana 2.241.20–21).

⁴⁴ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 147–154, 157–158 (ed. Mingana 2.242.8–15).

⁴⁵ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 141–142 (ed. Mingana 2.242.4–5).

⁴⁶ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 145–146 (ed. Mingana 2.242.7–8).

⁴⁷ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 133–138 (ed. Mingana 2.241.24–242.2).

And again elsewhere:

We constantly see a great marvel in the fashioning of us,
for humans sprout forth in the image of a human from inside seeds.
We see the seed, which humans sow into the earth of humans,
and although it is contemptible and despised, it turns and becomes a glorious vessel.⁴⁸

Thus, Narsai's theory of the generation of the soul requires God's ongoing creative activity. Bodies can, of course, reproduce, but God alone can create a soul. Human reproduction, then, is an occasion to reflect on the wonder of human composition and God's elegant design of the human form: "The greatness of [God's] power is constantly proclaimed in the fashioning of us."⁴⁹ For Narsai, then, this theory of the generation of souls is not mere philosophical speculation; it is a sign of God's care for humanity and God's activity in the world that should lead humans to glorify their creator.

Once again, Nemesius provides an important point of reference for Narsai. In this case, however, Nemesius's argument does not align with Narsai's conclusion. Nemesius rejects the idea that the body was created before the soul: "It would be a perversion of the truth, however, if one were to suppose that, because the soul was put into the body after the body had been framed, therefore the soul was created after the body. Moses does not say that the soul was created at that moment at which it was put in the body, nor would it be reasonable to suppose it."⁵⁰ In other words, Nemesius rejects the exegesis upon which Narsai bases his claim. For Narsai, it is self-evident that the creation of the soul follows the creation of the body because that is the order in which they appear in the text. Nemesius, for his part, rejects this position on *a priori* grounds because he believes all souls were created as part of the pre-material creation. Moreover, Nemesius makes his argument within a polemical context against both Eunomius and Apollinaris. Nemesius critiques Eunomius for teaching that the creation of souls after bodies would imply God's ongoing creative activity in the world, which Nemesius rejects based on Gn 2:2.⁵¹ Thus, it appears that, at least in principle, Narsai and Eunomius shared a common belief regarding the ongoing generation of souls⁵² – a position that Narsai's fellow Antiochene, Nemesius, explicitly rejects. Clearly, then, there was not necessarily a consensus position on this matter within the Antiochene tradition.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 165–168 (ed. Mingana 2.242.19–22).

⁴⁹ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 157 (ed. Mingana 2.242.14–15).

⁵⁰ Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 2.17 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emenseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 282).

⁵¹ "But if souls arrive out of non-existence, then creation is still going on in defiance of the word of Moses, that 'God rested from all his works.'" (Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 2.17 [ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emenseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 283–284]).

⁵² This is not to say that Narsai knew he shared this position with Eunomius, but simply that they happen to have come to the same conclusion.

⁵³ According to Gregory of Nyssa, Macrina provides an interesting middle ground on this

Against Apollinaris, Nemesius levels the claim that he teaches that souls reproduce themselves, just as bodies do.⁵⁴ Narsai also explicitly rejects this claim, and the fact that Nemesius attributes the idea to Apollinaris may explain why Narsai is so adamantly opposed to it. Given this context from Nemesius, we may justifiably assume that Narsai's insistence that souls do not reproduce by means of a "seed" the way that bodies do is part of a broader anti-Apollinarian polemic among Antiochene interpreters.

It is also worth noting that Christians were not the only ones who disagreed with one another on the timing of the creation of the soul and when the soul enters the body. Iamblichus offers a succinct summary of the various philosophical explanations for when and how the soul enters the body.⁵⁵ And there is some overlap between the Christian and non-Christian debates on this issue. For example, according to Iamblichus' account, non-Christian philosophers also debated whether the soul was generated by means of the seed in the act of reproduction.

The Qualities of the Soul

Having established Narsai's view with respect to the origin and generation of souls, we can now consider the qualities that he ascribes to the soul. There are three primary aspects of the soul's activity that stand out in this *mēmṛā*: control of bodily senses, the capacity for speech and reason, and creativity/artistry.

Through a series of evocative poetic images, Narsai depicts the ways that the soul controls the bodily senses. For example:

topic: She argues against both pre-existent souls and the idea that souls are formed after the body. For Macrina, the soul must be created at the precise moment that the bodily embryo begins to form. Thus, for Macrina, neither the body nor the soul can precede the other. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul* 9: "For if we should grant that the soul lives in some particular condition before the body, we would necessarily have to allow that there is some force in those absurd invented doctrines which settle the souls in the bodies through evil. On the other hand, no one with good sense would imagine that the origin of souls is later and younger than the formation of bodies, since everyone knows that none of the soulless beings has in itself the power of movement and growth. But there is no disagreement or doubt that those which are being nourished in the womb have growth and spacial movement. So, the remaining alternative is to suppose that soul and body have one and the same beginning" (ed. A. Spira, *Gregorii Nysseni, De anima et resurrectione* [Gregorii Nysseni Opera 3/3; Leiden: Brill, 2014]).

⁵⁴ "The opinion of Apollinarius, on the other hand, was that souls are born of souls, just as bodies are born of bodies, because the soul of the first man comes down, with the bodily succession, to all his offspring. For Apollinarius denies either that souls pre-existed or that they are being created now." (*On the Nature of Man*, II.17 [ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emenseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 284).

⁵⁵ *De anima*, 31–32 (ed. J.F. Finamore and J.M. Dillon, *Iamblichus De Anima: Text, Translation, and Commentary* [PA 92; Leiden: Brill, 2002], 58–61).

In the likeness of a spring flowing with life (God) set (the soul) within the body;
by her the dull senses are moistened for giving forth fruit.
Through the drinking of her reason (the spring) constructs the body,
and springing forth, gives a profession to its fashioner.⁵⁶

The imagery here is rich: The soul is a fountain, and the body is a tree or plant that 'sprouts' from the water provided by the fountain. Moreover, aside from its life-giving quality, the water of this fountain also 'moistens' the 'dull senses' so that they are able to produce fruit. The end result – the fruit – of the soul's provision is the sound of praise to the creator. Throughout these lines, Narsai intentionally plays with sensory concepts (the sight of a fountain/tree, the taste of drinking from a fountain, the sound of praise) to illustrate the soul as the source of sensation.

Elsewhere Narsai again vividly depicts the soul's capacity for sensation and its function in governing the body's senses:

Like a harp she engages the visible senses,
and the finger of her skillfulness makes sound in word and in hearing.
Like a flute that transmits wind, she has a mouth,
and she sings through it the sound of pleasant songs.
Through a hollow pipe she constantly sings pleasing sounds,
and she brings joy to the life of the sorrowful through the joy of her life.
Through her spirit of her vitality, the dead one⁵⁷ gives praise with sweet sounds,
and as if it were his own, it is proud that another has made it perceptible.
It is like a pipe deprived of sound and vitality,
but when the living soul sings in it, it acquires vitality.⁵⁸

Again, Narsai creatively employs sensory language, particularly of sound, to illustrate his point. Here Narsai invites his hearers to consider the soul as a skillful musician, first as a harp player, then a flutist. The image of the harp player envisions the soul controlling the senses by plucking strings – the strings of a harp do not move themselves to make sound, they must be played by an external force. Likewise, even though the soul controls the senses, the soul itself cannot make sounds without a bodily instrument. This interrelationship of the soul and body for sensation is seen clearly in the flute image: The soul sings through the mouth and through the hollow pipe. Indeed, the body, apart from the soul, is "deprived of sound and vitality." The body needs the song of the soul to live, and the soul needs the instrument of the body to sing.

In this imagery, Narsai clearly exhibits the Aristotelian view of the body/soul relationship with regard to the soul's dependence upon the body, which, by and large, became the *de facto* position for many philosophers of all "schools" after Aristotle. Whereas Plato had taught that the soul only relied on the body as a

⁵⁶ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 57–60 (ed. Mingana 2.239.22–24).

⁵⁷ I.e., the body, which would be dead without the soul.

⁵⁸ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 109–118 (ed. Mingana 2.241.8–14).

vehicle, Aristotle argued that the soul was the first actuality (ἐντελέχεια), which governed the capacity to engage in activity.⁵⁹ However, while the soul had this potential, it also needed a physical body to realize this actuality. That is to say, the soul maintained the capacity for sense perception, but it could not actualize this capacity without physical organs connected to a body. Thus, Narsai's depiction of the flute/flute player clearly relies on an assumption that the soul cannot act on its potentiality without the means of a body, and indeed this idea undergirds Narsai's thought elsewhere throughout the homily. Even more specifically, the flute imagery also calls to mind Aristotle's discussion of the larynx: "Hence, as we draw breath, the air enters: and so the impact upon the windpipe, as it is called, of the air breathed is voice, the cause of the impact being the soul which animates the vocal organs."⁶⁰ Thus, clearly reliant upon the Aristotelian tradition, Narsai's imagery demands the interdependence of the soul and body.

In classical philosophy, the harp/lyre imagery of the soul originates in the dialogues of Socrates. According to Plato, a certain Simmias of Thebes pursued a line of questioning with Socrates in which he asserts that bodies, like harps, are "corporeal" (σωματοειδῆ) and "composite" (σύνθετα) whereas the soul, like the harmony (ἁρμονία), is "invisible" (ἀόρατον), "incorporeal" (ἀσώματον), and "divine" (θεϊόν).⁶¹ Socrates rejects this argument, though, because – as Simmias notes – this would make the soul too dependent upon the existence of the body. In his commentary on *De Anima*, Alexander of Aphrodisias also rejects this analogy and dedicates a somewhat lengthy discussion to it.⁶² In the Latin tradition, Ambrose of Milan also briefly takes up this topic and argues that the soul is not a harmony (*harmonia*).⁶³ Nemesius refers explicitly to the Platonic dialogue and agrees that the soul cannot be thought of as a harmony.⁶⁴ Nemesius' argument is that the soul is a "governor" (ἀρχικός) that rules the body, while a harmony does not govern. However, it is worth pointing out the distinction between Simmias' harmony argument and Narsai's metaphor: Narsai does not claim that the soul is a harmony; rather, in Narsai's image, the soul is the harp-player. This is made clear by his reference to the "finger" that makes the sound on the harp. In this regard, Narsai's use of the metaphor is similar to Plotinus, though the latter argues that the 'harmony' is specifically the emotional part of

⁵⁹ *De Anima*, II.1 (412a27; ed. R. D. Hicks, *Aristotle De Anima with Translation, Introduction, and Notes* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907]).

⁶⁰ *De Anima*, 8.11 (ed. Hicks, *Aristotle*, 89).

⁶¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 85e–86o (ed. with trans. H. N. Fowler, *Plato: Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus* [LCL 36; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914]).

⁶² *De anima*, 24.18–26.30 (trans. V. Caston, *Alexander of Aphrodisias: On the Soul, Part 1: Soul as Form of the Body, Parts of the Soul, Nourishment and Perception* [Ancient Commentators on Aristotle; London: Bloomsbury, 2012]).

⁶³ *On Isaac and the Soul*, 2.4 (PL 14, 529–530).

⁶⁴ *On the Nature of Man*, II.14 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*).

the soul.⁶⁵ Thus, it seems that Narsai uses a common trope from soul-body philosophical literature but, like Plotinus, by shifting the metaphor to compare the soul to the musician rather than the tune, he avoids the soul-as-harmony error that many previous philosophers reject.

One of the most frequently occurring capacities that Narsai attributes to the soul is the ‘capacity for speech/reason’ (*mlilutā*). This is, of course, related to the issue of the senses. The body has the mouth (as we have just seen with the flute imagery), but only the soul has ‘speech-capacity’, which puts sounds through the mouth. For Narsai, this capacity for speech/reason is a sign that humans are created in God’s image: “(As an) impression in his image, (God) bound within him his creative power / silence in his body, but also the capacity for speech in the formation of his soul.”⁶⁶

In classical Greek psychology, the soul’s capacity for reason/speech (λόγος) is one of the primary qualities that distinguishes human souls from the souls of other living beings – the distinction between rational souls and irrational souls.⁶⁷ Moreover, as we have already seen, the Aramaic Targum tradition explicitly links the creation of the soul in Gn 2:7 with the capacity for speech. Nemesius, like Narsai, argues that the “rational” aspect of human existence, which distinguishes human nature from animals and plants, is proof that humans are created in God’s image.⁶⁸

The same couplet from Narsai cited above also introduces another divine quality that God has granted to the soul: creativity or artistry.⁶⁹ Throughout the *mēmṛā*, Narsai uses two words for the creative ability within the human soul: *bāroyutā* and *’ummānuṭā*.⁷⁰ As demonstrated in the previous citation, *bāroyutā*

⁶⁵ *Enneads*, 3.6: “But the emotional part of the soul remains in the form of a tune (ἁρμονία). The causes of movement are analogous to the player, and the parts which receive the shocks from emotion might bear an analogy to the strings.” (translation from Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators*, 1.183; ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, *Platoni Opera*, vol. 1. *Enneades* 1–3 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964]).

⁶⁶ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 31–32 (ed. Mingana 2.239.5–6).

⁶⁷ Though later commentators on the classical tradition were by no means in agreement about this. Porphyry, in particular, should be noted because he argued that animals did have a rational soul because, regardless of whether humans can understand them, they can speak and communicate with their own kind; see Porphyry, *Abstinence*, 3.3.4; 3.4.4. Moreover, Porphyry also notes that some birds are even capable of mimicking human speech, which suggests a rational soul; *Abstinence*, 3.4.7 (ed. J. Bouffartigue, M. Patillon, and Ph. Segonds, *Porphyre, De l’abstinence* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1979–1995]).

⁶⁸ *On the Nature of Man*, 1.2–3. Indeed, while recognizing that animals do have varying levels of communication abilities, Nemesius argues that humans alone have “articulate speech” (ἔναρθρος διάλεκτος) attached to “thought” (διάνοια) and “reasoning” (λογισμός); *On the Nature of Man*, 1.3 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*).

⁶⁹ For a more thorough analysis of Narsai’s use of creativity and artistry, see Rodrigo Gómez’s contribution in this volume (pp. 187–197).

⁷⁰ Generally Narsai uses *bāroyutā* when he refers to God’s creative ability and *’ummānuṭā* when he refers to the artistic or creative ability of the soul. However, there is at least one occasion

is an impression of God's own nature, but it is also a mystery that causes humans to inquire into their own nature, and there find God:

In its soul, (God) placed the great treasure of his creativity (*bāroyuṭēh*),
so that everything that is made might request for the sustenance of its life.
The human soul is a treasury of hidden things
for in it, the infinite power of the creator (*bāroyā*) is contained.
Hidden secrets are concealed within the inquiry into her formation.
and they cannot be explored except through the power of her creativity (*bāroyuṭāh*).⁷¹

So, by implanting God's own creative abilities within the soul, God grants to humans the ability to speculate about human nature as a means by which they might learn something about their creator. Narsai returns to this precise theme again later in the *mēmṛā*:

O painter, how wise is your creative power (*bāroyuṭāk*),
that in humanity you have revealed your greatness to the work of your hands!
As on a tablet, you have depicted the world in body and soul,
so that heaven and earth might seek you through its revelation.⁷²

Here again we see the theme, as with 'capacity for speech/reason' (*mliluṭā*), that God has given particular qualities or abilities to the soul that, in turn, make the created thing seek out its creator, in order that it might give praise where praise is due.

The Soul's Responsibility Within the Body

In addition to its capacities and the functions that the soul performs within the body, Narsai also provides extensive reflection on the soul's responsibility within the body. Again, like his treatment of the qualities of the soul, Narsai's description of the soul-body relationship relies heavily on evocative imagery. For example, early in the *mēmṛā* Narsai uses a nautical metaphor:

By her lightness (the body) crosses the sea as if on dry land,
and the weight of its body does not sink in the floods.
Like an anchor, she hangs on the vessel of its corporeality,
and she keeps it from injuries, so that it is not destroyed.
(The body) travels to her appointed destination like a sailor in the starlight,
and she navigates the path of (its) journey to a safe harbor.⁷³

where he uses *bāroyuṭā* in reference to the soul, so his usage of these terms is not a clear distinction of divine as opposed to human capacities.

⁷¹ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 39–44 (ed. Mingana 2.239.10–14).

⁷² *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 353–356 (ed. Mingana 2.247.22–248.1).

⁷³ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 77–82 (ed. Mingana 2.240.11–15).

One interesting element of this metaphor is the flexibility that Narsai employs to describe the function of the soul. Despite the fact that he maintains a constant image of nautical navigation over six lines, the body is clearly the boat, but the identification of the soul shifts throughout this chain of metaphors: It is a boat (implied), an anchor, a captain, and a navigator. It is all of these things at the same time, and it seems that Narsai employs this multiplicity of roles intentionally to show just how much the soul does for its vessel. By performing each of these roles, the soul navigates its boat toward a safe harbor.

The sailor-ship analogy of the soul's relationship to the body is at least as old as Aristotle, though Aristotle does not make significant use of it and in fact neither explicitly accepts nor rejects the analogy.⁷⁴ In his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, Alexander of Aphrodisias discusses the sailor-ship metaphor multiple times, and he explicitly rejects it.⁷⁵ Plotinus also discusses the analogy, and although he finds it useful for illustrating that the soul and body are separable, he also clearly notes the inadequacy of the analogy.⁷⁶

In addition to the sailor-ship analogy, Narsai also compares the soul to a charioteer:

Like horses, its senses are constrained by her authority,
but it does not understand what is the cause of its constraint.
Like a charioteer, her will drives on its body,
and wherever she wills, the boat of its corporeality is directed.
As if grasping reigns, (she guides) the path of its actions,
and she directs it so that it does not stumble in (its) desires.
A word from her restricts its mouth like a muzzle,
and does not allow him to harm himself or his companions.⁷⁷

The idea behind the imagery here is more or less the same as the previous metaphor, but with the added component that it mentions the soul's control over the senses. This image also depicts the soul in a more active role, asserting her will over the body in order to steer and protect it.

The charioteer-chariot analogy has its origins in the Socratic dialogues of Plato's *Phaedrus*.⁷⁸ However, despite the fact that Narsai uses this common

⁷⁴ Aristotle mentions this analogy in *De Anima*, II.1 (413a8; ed. Hicks, *Aristotle*), where he sets up the question of whether the soul is the actuality of the body in the same way that a sailor is of the ship. For more on Aristotle's indecision on the analogy, see T. Olschewsky, "On the Relations of Soul to Body in Plato and Aristotle," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14.4 (1976): 400–402. For a more in-depth consideration of Aristotle's employment of this metaphor, see T. Tracy, "The Soul/Boatman Analogy in Aristotle's *De anima*," *CP* 77.2 (1982): 97–112. For a critique of Tracy's argument and further discussion, see A. P. Bos, *The Soul and Its Instrumental Body: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle's Philosophy of Living Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 123–135.

⁷⁵ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On the Soul*, 14.4–5, 15.9–10, 20.26–21.21 (ed. Caston, *Alexander of Aphrodisias*).

⁷⁶ *Enneads*, 4.3.21 (ed. Henry and Schwyzer, *Platoni Opera*).

⁷⁷ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 299–306 (ed. Mingana 2.246.12–17).

⁷⁸ *Phaedrus*, 246a–257b (ed. Fowler, *Plato*).

metaphor, it is obvious that he employs it differently from Socrates. In Narsai's analogy, the soul is the charioteer, the body is the chariot, and the horses are the bodily senses. By contrast, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul is, to some extent, the whole combination of charioteer, chariot, and horses; Socrates contends that the human soul is like a pair of unevenly yoked horses, one noble and well trained, and the other wild and difficult to control.⁷⁹ Iamblichus briefly mentions both the sailor-ship and charioteer analogies as common ways of explaining the soul-body relationship, but he clearly finds both to be deficient.⁸⁰ Again, it seems clear that Narsai is intentionally using and transforming a classical metaphor of body and soul for his own purposes.

Both of these metaphors, then, depict the soul in a protective role, guarding the body, guiding the body, and leading it through life. But elsewhere in the *mēmṛā*, there is an even more significant role that the soul plays: that of champion in the struggle against the passions. Again, as with the nautical metaphor, Narsai feels free to play with the imagery as he depicts the way that the soul engages against the passions with the body:

In love, she urgently exhorts her substance and her partner,
that they not be deterred from the fight for truth.
Like a watchman, she cries out to the senses and the thoughts,
"Arise and prevail with good works!"⁸¹

In this image, the soul takes on the role of a coach in an athletic contest, shouting from the sideline or, perhaps even more suitable for this struggle, shouting from the corner of the boxing ring, encouraging and exhorting the athlete throughout the contest.

Elsewhere, Narsai provides an even more complex set of images for the soul's function in the struggle of the passions:

Through her power, (the body) contends against the enticements of its desires,
and with her help, it defeats the sufferings of its mortality.
Through her, it is triumphant in the struggle of the righteous labor,
and she gives it the crown of victory on account of its endurance.
She teaches it to take up the combat spiritually,
and she exhorts it not to stumble before the enemy.
She holds the immortal crown of life in her mind,
and she entices it (with the crown) like a child: "come and receive!"
With it, she descends to all the struggles of desires,
and like an athlete, she anoints its senses, so that they not be taken captive.⁸²

⁷⁹ For an excellent discussion of the unruly horse, see E. Belfiore, "Dancing With the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato's *Phaedrus*," *AJP* 127.2 (2006): 185–217.

⁸⁰ *De anima*, 33 (ed. Finamore and Dillon, *Iamblichus*).

⁸¹ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 313–316 (ed. Mingana 2.246.21–24).

⁸² *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 377–386 (ed. Mingana 2.248.14–21).

Once again, it is difficult to nail down the precise role that the soul plays throughout this metaphor of the athletic contest. In some lines, it sounds like a coach or training partner, whereas in others the soul is the force that provides the strength by which the body fights. Again, this malleability of the metaphor is likely intentional by Narsai. Although it is the body that contends against bodily passions, it is the soul that does the real work: It motivates, protects, pushes, encourages, and empowers the body in which it dwells in order to help it prevail in the good fight.

The Fate of the Soul at Death

One of the most significant questions regarding the soul in Antiquity and Late Antiquity is what happens to it at death, and, particularly for Christian and Jewish authors, whether the soul is re-united with its corporeal companion. The first question to consider is what happens to the soul immediately upon death: Does it remain with the body or depart? Narsai unequivocally argues for the latter:

Mighty travails also strike her in the time of death,
when they drive her out from within the body like a child.
Like a robber, death enters the temple of her habitation,
and plunders her from within her modest body.
Stripped naked, the mistress of the body departs from her house,
and like an exile, she leaves it for another place.
Her mind bears great grief on the day of her departure,
because she sees her habitation that death has hastily destroyed.⁸³

So the soul clearly leaves the body, but where does it go? Narsai addresses this elsewhere:

One of the watchers comes down to her on the day of her departure,
and leads her to where it has been commanded by the creator.
Like a guide, a spirit leads the spiritual one,
until she enters the lodging place with her companions.
That angel, who preserved her in this present life,
shows her where she will dwell until the resurrection.
Every soul is commanded to dwell on earth,
some of them in Eden and some of them in the place where they have been sent.
In the place of Eden dwell the souls of the lovers of truth,
and those of the unrighteous (dwell) in places beyond it.
In paradise the righteous dwell in spirit, but not in body,
while they eagerly await the construction of the exalted kingdom.⁸⁴

According to Narsai's description here, the soul has an angelic guide to lead her to an appointed place. Narsai makes it very clear that souls do not leave Earth;

⁸³ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 391–398 (ed. Mingana 2.248.24–249.4).

⁸⁴ *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul', 417–428 (ed. Mingana 2.249.16–24).

rather, they go to places to await the resurrection. The souls of the righteous go to Eden, to paradise. The souls of the unrighteous, in contrast, go to some unnamed destination beyond, or outside of paradise.⁸⁵ As for what souls do in paradise, again Narsai gives an explicit answer:

Every soul that endures sufferings enters Eden,
and there they rest as if upon a pleasant bed.
As if in slumber, they rest from (their) actions there,
and they do not make use of the mighty eloquence that is in them.
They indeed rest from the toil of good and bad,
and they do not contend in the struggle of righteous labor.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, Narsai does not tell us anything about the souls who are not in Eden. He makes no further mention of them. He is clear, though, about what the souls of the righteous do: They *rest*. Indeed, they rest “as if in slumber.” However, it is worth noting that he does not actually say that they sleep. Narsai then continues to describe this restful state:

It is not the case that the power that is in them has ceased from vitality,
rather, it is no longer a bodily vessel transmitting words.
It is not the case that the stream of discernment has been cut off and dried up,
rather, it is no longer a bodily tree that needs irrigation.⁸⁷

That is, Narsai argues that souls do not lose their inherent qualities of sensation and capacity for speech, but the soul is unable to perform these functions without the body. The soul does not lose its capacities, but in its incorporeal state it is incapacitated.

Regarding the fate of souls at death, perhaps the most useful points of comparison are Narsai's predecessors in Syriac literature, namely Aphrahaṭ and Ephrem. Aphrahaṭ is significant in this comparison because of the relative idiosyncrasy of his views on the matter. According to Aphrahaṭ's argument in *Dem.* 6, when a person dies, the soul is buried with the body and sleeps, and the soul loses its capacity for sense-perception.⁸⁸ Subsequently, on the day of the resurrection, both bodies and souls are resurrected together. Furthermore, in *Dem.* 8, Aphrahaṭ expands on this topic, and although he refrains from claiming that the souls of the righteous will be rewarded or that the souls of the unrighteous will be punished in the time period awaiting the resurrection, he does

⁸⁵ The thirteenth-century East Syrian author of the *Book of the Bee*, Solomon of Baṣra, appears to be aware of Narsai's argument (or perhaps someone else with a position very similar to that of Narsai). In his brief summary of opinions regarding the destination of the soul at the time of death, Solomon says “Others say that they go to Paradise, that is, to the place which is abundantly supplied with the good things of the mystery of the revelations of God; and that the souls of sinners lie in darkness in the abyss of Eden outside Paradise.” (ed. and tran. E.A. W. Budge, *The Book of the Bee* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886], 131).

⁸⁶ *Mēmra* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 463–468 (ed. Mingana 2.251.3–6).

⁸⁷ *Mēmra* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 468–472 (ed. Mingana 2.251.7–9).

⁸⁸ *Dem.* 6, 14 (ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*).

claim that the sleep of the righteous souls will be peaceful while the sleep of the unrighteous souls will be restless.⁸⁹ It is also worth noting here that Aphrahat's argument is closely paralleled by Macrina's teaching in Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. Specifically, though Macrina does not say anything about sense-perception, she does argue that the soul remains with the body even though the body decomposes.⁹⁰

In Hymn 8 of the *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem offers a brief reflection on the fate of the soul as it awaits the resurrection. Here, Ephrem discusses the relationship of the bodily senses to the soul in some detail, and indeed, he finds himself perplexed at thinking that a soul would enter paradise while lacking the ability of perception to enjoy it:

That blessed abode is in no way deficient,
for that place is complete and perfected in every way,
and the soul cannot enter there alone,
for in such a state it is in everything deficient –
in sensation and consciousness; but on the day of Resurrection
the body, with all its senses, will enter in as well, once it has been made perfect.⁹¹

Whereas Narsai argues that the souls of the righteous enter paradise and there await the resurrection, Ephrem cannot abide this scenario because it implies that souls can enter paradise without their bodies. Thus, he concludes that since souls cannot enter paradise without their bodies, the souls of the just and righteous dwell in "delightful mansions on the borders of Paradise."⁹²

In comparison with his predecessors, Narsai has both similarities and differences – though, certainly, he is closer to Ephrem than to Aphrahat. In contrast to Aphrahat, although Narsai says that souls rest, he does not say that the soul sleeps, and he explicitly argues that the soul does not lose its capacities. Narsai's argument is very close to Ephrem's, except for the clear disagreement on whether souls can enter paradise without their bodies.

The Soul/Body Relationship as a Microcosm for Theological Issues

The final component of Narsai's depiction of the soul-body relationship under examination here is his use of this analogy as a microcosm of theological

⁸⁹ Dem. 8, 19 (ed. Parisot, *Aphraatis*): "The upright lie down and their sleep is pleasant, throughout day and night. For they do not perceive the whole night to be long, but experience it as though it were a single moment. Then, when the morning comes, they wake up and rejoice. The sleep of the wicked, however, lies heavily upon them, like a man stricken with a strong, deep fever who tosses and turns on his bed, and who is disturbed throughout the long night. They fear the morning, when their master will condemn them."

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul*, ch. 4 (ed. Spira, *Gregorii Nysseni*).

⁹¹ *Hymns on Paradise*, 8.7; cf. 8.9 (trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133–134).

⁹² *Hymns on Paradise*, 8.11 (trans. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, 133–134).

arguments. For example, Narsai explicitly states that the soul can show us something about the relationship among the persons of the Trinity:

The mystery of investigation into the name of the Divine Being is in her generation,
And her formation is depicted threefold in word and power.
Her likeness resembles on a small scale the investigation of the persons:
her nature (is like) the Father, her word (is like) the Son, and her life (is like) the Spirit.⁹³

The soul, then, as the component of humanity upon which God has impressed God's own image, reflects the triune nature of God's identity. Narsai does not appear to be engaging in a specific theological argument here; rather, he is simply using his explication of the soul as a way to invite his audience to reflect on the mystery of the Trinity. While this example is explicit, there are other examples that are less obvious candidates for theological speculation. However, upon close contextual examination, it becomes clear that these claims are best understood against the backdrop of the Christological controversy.

First, it is likely not a coincidence that Narsai insists upon the distinction of body and soul, and he specifically argues that they are not mixed. For example:

Her nature is within her, but her operation is outward in works,
And although she is in it, it is distinct from her, and she is also (distinct) from it.
The construction of her quality is not mixed through all of it,
for it is one, and she is one, without mixture.⁹⁴

This language of distinct natures of the soul and body could easily be seen as a sly argument in favor of distinct natures in Christ. In fact, in his most explicitly christological *mēmṛā* (*Mēmṛā* 81 'On John 1:14'), Narsai employs similar language of the body and soul as an analogy for Christ's natures:

As the soul and body are equal
and called one person (*parṣopā*, *πρόσωπον*)

...

The two are called one person (*parṣopā*, *πρόσωπον*),
and they are separate from each other.
One is a servant, and one is the maker;
they are one in union.⁹⁵

Narsai's rejection of "mixture" between body and soul coheres well with Antiochene writings, which rejected any formula of Christ's nature that mixed or mingled divine and human natures, whether Apollinarian or Eutychian.

With respect to the language of "mixture" in the soul-body analogy as an argument about Christology, a comparison with other authors is quite useful.

⁹³ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 45–48 (ed. Mingana 2.239.13–15).

⁹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 66 'On the Soul', 213–216 (ed. Mingana 2.244.1–4).

⁹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 81 'On John 1:14' (ms. British Library Oriental 5463, f. 342r).

For example, in his work *On the Incarnation*, Narsai's fellow Antiochene Theodoret asserts:

We do not say that the soul is mixed with the body, but rather that she is united and conjoined (with it), and dwells and works within (it). Nobody would say that the soul is mortal or the body immortal without being entirely in foolish error. So while we distinguish each (nature), we acknowledge one living being composed out of these. We name each nature with separate names: the former 'soul', the latter 'body', yet the living being composed out of both we call by a different name, for we label that 'human'. Therefore, taking this also as an image of the *oikonomia*, let us avoid that blasphemy (of the confusion of natures), and abandoning (the term) 'mixture', let us apply consistently the terms of 'union' (*ένώσεως*), 'conjunction' (*συναφείας*) and 'togetherness' (*κοινωνίας*), teaching the distinction of nature, and the unity of the person (*προσώπου*).⁹⁶

There are several points of interest in this quotation, but the most notable is that Theodoret's primary argument is that the body-soul relationship provides an analogy for the unmixed natures of Christ. That is, no one would be so foolish as to say that soul and body are mixed; so too then would it appear foolish to argue that the divine and human natures are mixed in Christ.

Likewise, Nemesius offers helpful perspective regarding the language of mixture in the body-soul relationship. Taking up the problem of how the soul can be said to be in union with the body without resulting in the conclusion that the soul is perishable along with the body or that it merely stands in 'juxtaposition' to the body it inhabits (both of which he rejects – and he also explicitly rejects the mixture of wine and water as a suitable metaphor), Nemesius turns to Ammonias Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus for a solution: "[Ammonius] said that it is in the nature of intelligibles both to be capable of union with things adapted to receive them ... and to remain unconfused with them while in union."⁹⁷ Based on Ammonius' argument, Nemesius is able to conclude that "the soul suffers no change as a result of union with the body (*οὐκ ἄρα ἀλλοιοῦται ἡ ψυχὴ ἐν τῇ ἐνώσει*),"⁹⁸ and even more explicitly, "the soul is united to the body, and, further, this union is without confusion" (*καὶ ἥνεται τοίνον καὶ ἀσυγχύτως ἥνεται τῷ σώματι ἡ ψυχὴ*).⁹⁹ Then, just a few paragraphs later, Nemesius explicitly links this discussion of the union of soul and body without mixture to Christology: "The above arguments would apply even more exactly to the union (*ένώσει*) of the divine Word with his humanity, for he continued thus in union without

⁹⁶ Theodoret, *De Incarnatione* 34 [32] (ed. PG 75, 1472D–1473A). Quoted in Kupan, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, 72–73 (quotation slightly adapted).

⁹⁷ *On the Nature of Man*, III.20 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 295). If Nemesius is referring to a specific work of Ammonius, that work has not survived.

⁹⁸ *On the Nature of Man*, III.20 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 295).

⁹⁹ *On the Nature of Man*, III.21 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 296).

confusion" (ἀσυγχύτως).¹⁰⁰ Thus, it is clear that Nemesius draws an explicit link between the unmixed union of body and soul with the unmixed union of divinity and humanity in Christ. And, in the process of his argument, he quotes both Ammonius Saccus and Porphyry as unwitting witnesses to the veracity of his claims.¹⁰¹

In the Latin West, Augustine also made explicit use of the body-soul analogy for representing the relationship of human and divine natures in the person of Christ. Interestingly, although Augustine is perfectly content to use language of "mixture" (*mixtura*), he also specifies how this mixture should be explained:

For just as the soul is united (*unitur*) to the body in one person so as to constitute man, in the same way God united to man in one person so as to constitute Christ. In the former person, there is a combination (*mixtura*) of soul and body; in the latter there is a combination of divine and human. Let my reader, however, guard against borrowing his idea of the combination from the properties of material bodies, by which two fluids when combined are so mixed that neither preserves its original character; although even among material bodies there are exceptions, such as light, which sustains no change when combined with the atmosphere. In the person of a human, therefore, there is a combination of soul and body; in the person of Christ there is a combination of the divine with human; for when the Word of God was united to a soul having a body, He took into union with Himself both the soul and the body.¹⁰²

Augustine frames this use of the body-soul analogy against people who resist this explanation of Christology. However, Augustine makes the case that the body-soul relationship is essential to understanding the union of divine and human in Christ. Indeed, Augustine argues that if humans can grasp that an immaterial soul can be joined to a material body, then it is much easier to believe that another incorporeal entity – the Word of God – can be joined to them.

If we turn back to Narsai, elsewhere he returns to the distinctiveness of the body's nature and the soul's nature, and again we see grounds for a dyophysite Christology: "The passions of her nature and those of the bodily nature are dis-

¹⁰⁰ *On the Nature of Man*, III.22 (ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 300). Nemesius does go on to differentiate somewhat the soul-body union from the human-divine union, but only to make it absolutely clear that "The Word mingles with body and soul, and yet remains throughout unmixed, unconfused, uncorrupted, untransformed, not sharing their passivity but only their activity, not perishing with them, nor changing as they change ..." (*On the Nature of Man*, III.22 [ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril and Nestorius*, 301]). In other words, Nemesius grants that the soul-body is not a perfect metaphor because the soul can be ruled by the body and the body can be ruled by the soul, yet he nevertheless maintains that the union envisioned by the soul-body relationship where two things co-exist without change to the intelligible thing is at least comparable to the human-divine union.

¹⁰¹ We have already seen the reference to Ammonius; immediately after Nemesius makes this argument explicitly Christological, he quotes Porphyry, who argued that one thing can be assumed by another thing without resulting in any change (*On the Nature of Man*, III.22 [ed. Morani, *Nemesii Emeseni*; trans. Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, 301]).

¹⁰² *Letter 137*, 11 (tr. [slightly adapted] J. G. Cunningham, in *NPNF*, 1.477).

inct / yet because of love, behold, it is said that they are one person.”¹⁰³ By distinguishing between the passions of the body and those of the soul, it is possible that Narsai is laying the groundwork for a theory of the union of ‘person’ in Christ that would allow for the two natures to remain distinct yet intact as one person.

In this same quotation, it is also noteworthy that Narsai claims that the soul and body are one person “because of love.” This language evokes the prosopic union, the Antiochene *synapheia* of the two persons in Christ, bound together not by nature, but by mutual love. Indeed, elsewhere in this *mēmṛā* we see other language that is reminiscent of this bond: “In love she is bound together with (the body’s) senses, as in a yoke.”¹⁰⁴ This language of the bond of love is evocative of both Theodore of Mopsuestia and especially Nestorius, who explicitly claims that the two natures of Christ, while remaining distinct in ‘being’ are “united by love in the same person.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, it is worth noting that Nestorius also explicitly uses the soul-body analogy to describe the union of divine and human natures: “Just as the soul and body (unite) in one human nature, so also is God the Word united with humanity.”¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, Narsai goes to some length to convince his audience that the nature of the soul *always* has its capacities, from the womb to the tomb. That is, the abilities of the soul do not grow or expand, but the soul has the wisdom to only employ its abilities as the body can handle it. For example, consider the following:

Its construction from the beginning when it was created is perfect,
but the body does not make use of its perfection outwardly.
The word of her rationality is in her from the day that she came into being,
but the course of her swiftness is restricted by the limbs.
She knows how to sing a pleasant song,
but insofar as the fleshly flute is weak, she is also weak.
She understands the order to pluck the harp of her existence well,
but she is afraid of stretching the strings of the body (too much), lest they should snap.
She possesses the power of discernment in order to be confident,
but the senses of the body do not respond to her (when) she plays well.
Wisely she keeps her treasure, outside of silence,
until the body grows, and the child inherits its possessions.
...
With its growth, it rises to the level of its youthfulness,
but with its old age, it decreases to the level of its weakness.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 279–280 (ed. Mingana 2.245.23–25).

¹⁰⁴ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 263 (ed. Mingana 2.245.13).

¹⁰⁵ P. Bedjan, *Nestorius. Le Livre d’Héraclide de Damas* (Paris–Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1910), 81.

¹⁰⁶ Bedjan, *Nestorius*, 236.

¹⁰⁷ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 231–240, 245–246 (ed. Mingana 2.244.13–20, 245.1–2).

It is not immediately evident that Narsai's argument here is Christological in nature. However, in the Chalcedonian controversy, an exegetical dispute arose over the capacities of Jesus, specifically related to the interpretation of Luke 2:52 ("Jesus grew in age and wisdom"). For example, Diodore of Tarsus argues that this claim cannot be about God the Word because "he is God, a Perfect One begotten from the Perfect One."¹⁰⁸ Diodore continues, "He, therefore, grew not, for his is not imperfect such that he would grow to that which is perfect, but that which grew in age and wisdom was the flesh. Neither did the divinity, after (the body) was formed or born, place immediately its entire wisdom in it, but rather little by little it gave (it) to the body."¹⁰⁹ Thus, the implication here is that Diodore attributes Jesus' growth to his human nature, not to his divine nature. Theodore of Mopsuestia also addresses the interpretation of Luke 2:52 in his *On the Incarnation*. His treatment of the passage makes it clear that the Antiochenes forged their position on this verse in opposition to the Apollinarians and Eunomians. For Theodore, both of these positions fail to properly address the issue of Christ's having a rational soul (*naṣṣā yaddo'tānāytā*), which seems to contradict Jesus growing "in wisdom."¹¹⁰

On the opposite side of the Christological spectrum, Philoxenos of Mabbug rejects an exegetical conclusion of this passage that separates the natures. In fact, Philoxenos attributes the Antiochene misunderstanding of this verse to the fact that human foolishness cannot comprehend the wisdom of God.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Philoxenos also expands from his exegesis of Luke 2:52 directly into a polemic against Theodore,¹¹² which testifies to the contested interpretation of this verse in the fifth- and sixth-century Christological debates. With the polemical setting of this argument over Jesus' natures in mind, it is easy to see how Narsai's argument about the soul limiting its activities with respect to the body's abilities might actually be a Christological argument in disguise: Namely, just as the divine nature does not "grow" along with the human Jesus (i.e., the Antiochene interpretation of Luke 2:52), neither do the capacities of the soul grow with respect to the abilities of the body.

¹⁰⁸ Severus, *Philaletes* (ed. with trans. R. Hespel, *Sévère d'Antioch. Le Philalèthe* [CSCO 133–134; Leuven: Peeters, 1952], 153; trans. J. Behr, *The Case against Diodore and Theodore: Texts and their Contexts* [Oxford Early Christian Texts; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 239).

¹⁰⁹ Severus, *Philaletes* (ed. Hespel, *Sévère d'Antioch. Le Philalèthe*, 153; trans. Behr, *Case against Diodore and Theodore*, 239). See also the same quotation in Latin: Behr, *The Case against Diodore and Theodore*, 267.

¹¹⁰ *On the Incarnation*, fol. 4 (text and trans. Behr, *Case against Diodore and Theodore*, 450–453).

¹¹¹ *Commentary on Luke*, Fragment 48 (ed. and trans. J.W. Watt, *Philoxenos of Mabbug. Fragments of the Commentary on Matthew and Luke* [CSCO 392–393; Leuven: Peeters, 1978], 53–55 [Syriac], 46–47 [English]).

¹¹² *Commentary on Luke*, Fragment 49 (ed. and trans. Watt, *Philoxenos of Mabbug*, 55–57 [Syriac], 47–48 [English]).

Finally, on three occasions, Narsai uses the word “passibility” or “capacity to suffer” (*ḥšōṣutā*), and his usage of this term with respect to the soul might be best interpreted as a cipher for the divine nature of Christ. Two of the occurrences of the word in particular are worth noting:

She hates his sufferings, even though she does not suffer in his passibility.
In love, she suffers with her beloved, (but) not in nature
for her nature is exalted above every bodily suffering.¹¹³

...

She is not injured in the passibility of the suffering body,
and she is not destroyed when her outer garment is destroyed.¹¹⁴

In other words, the body suffers, but the soul does not suffer within it. Narsai also brings up the topic of the soul and the body’s suffering in *Mēmṛā* 81 ‘On John 1:14’, and here he makes it explicit that this analogy holds true for the relationship of humanity and divinity:

The soul does not suffer within the body
when its limbs are beaten,
and the divinity does not suffer
in the sufferings of the body in which it dwells.

...

The soul suffers with the body
in love but not in nature.¹¹⁵

Despite the fact that body and soul are bound together as one person, the bodily nature experiences suffering, while the nature of the soul does not. This language closely mirrors the way that Antiochene writers speak of the human nature of Christ suffering while the divine nature does not.

Given the confluence of these various arguments that might undergird dyophysite Christology, I think their appearance in this *mēmṛā* is likely not a coincidence. After all, as we have seen, Narsai was not the only post-Chalcedonian writer to use the body-soul relationship as a metaphor for Christ’s identity. It is interesting to note, though, how coy Narsai is with this argument. He never makes the links explicit between the body-soul relationship and Christ’s natures, but the arguments are so similar that it seems that his ultimate purpose in deploying this language must have been didactic in nature for his audience. Without giving them the explicit link, he provides them with the language and with the undergirding arguments that would ultimately support his christological claims.

As a final piece of this argument, it is worth observing that theologians in the Alexandrian/miaphysite milieu also employed the body-soul relationship in

¹¹³ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 258–260 (ed. Mingana 2.245.9–11).

¹¹⁴ *Mēmṛā* 66 ‘On the Soul’, 411–412 (ed. Mingana 2.249.12–13).

¹¹⁵ *Mēmṛā* 81 ‘On John 1:14’ (ms. British Library Oriental 5463, f. 342r).

their christological arguments. For example, in his third letter to Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria uses language of the body-soul:

As for our Savior's statements in the Gospels, we do not divide them out to two subjects or persons. The one, unique Christ has no duality, though he is seen as compounded in inseparable unity out of two differing elements in the way that a human being, for example, is seen to have no duality but to be one, consisting of the pair of elements, body and soul.¹¹⁶

Similarly, Severus of Antioch also employs the body-soul analogy:

We are composed of body and soul, and we see two natures (*kyānē*) the one that of the body, the other that of the soul; but the human being is one from the two due to the union. And the fact that he is composed out of two natures does not permit us to conclude that he who is one is two men, but rather one single man, as I have said, on account of the composition from body and soul.

And the man that we are may serve us as an example. For with regard to him we comprehend two natures, one that of the soul and the other that of the body. However, although in subtle reflection we distinguish or in the imagination of the mind perceive a distinction, we still do not juxtapose the natures and do not allow in them the power of the separation to exhaust itself entirely, but we understand that they belong to a single unique being in such a way that from then on the two are no longer two, but through the two a single living being has been formed.¹¹⁷

Thus, Cyril and Severus make use of the exact same analogy as Theodoret and Narsai; yet, they employ it in support of the opposite Christological conclusion, emphasizing the unity of the human being that is a result of the composite of body and soul. It appears, then, that this analogy works both ways, depending on how one describes the body-soul relationship. Is it a composite of two, acting as one? Or is it one entity that maintains a distinction between the two? This is, of course, the inherent problem with analogies: They are malleable.

Conclusion

In the preceding analysis, I have attempted to read and understand Narsai's arguments concerning the body-soul relationship and the nature of the soul in his *Mēmra* 66 'On the Soul' within a broader literary and intellectual context. On the surface, Narsai does not engage any particular competing ideologies concerning the soul; however, when read in concert with other ancient and late antique authors, it becomes readily apparent that Narsai is aware of and con-

¹¹⁶ Cyril, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 8 (ed. L.R. Wickham, *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983], 22–23).

¹¹⁷ Severus, *Philalethes*, 42 (Hespel, *Sévère d'Antioch. Le Philalèthe*, 213ff); Quoted in A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2. *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, Part 2. *The Church of Constantinople in the Sixth Century* (trans. J. Cawte and P. Allen; London: Mowbray, 1995), 34.

versant with contemporary trends in philosophical debates about the soul. In particular, it is illuminating to read Narsai's claims alongside Nemesius, because Nemesius often provides a polemical framework within which we can see Narsai participating in theological debates through his homilies. In this sense, we can view Narsai's *Mēmrā* 66 'On the Soul' as a sort of theological catechism for his audience, training them to think correctly about significant theological matters without engaging directly in polemic.

Throughout the homily, Narsai invites his hearers to consider the marvels of their own composition as an impetus to praise God. However, with the polemical context of Narsai's claims in mind, it is clear that Narsai also wants his hearers to reflect on their existence as a proof of particular theological claims. Humans, made in God's image, bear the likeness of their creator; thus, for Narsai – and other authors in Late Antiquity – a proper understanding of human nature undergirds "orthodox" theology. When read within this framework, the didactic strategy of Narsai's *Mēmrā* 66 'On the Soul' emerges: The body-soul relationship is not merely an analogy for explaining complex theological arguments, it is a divine revelation which, when properly understood, reveals God's very nature:

As on a tablet, you have depicted the world in body and soul,
so that heaven and earth might seek you through its revelation.¹¹⁸

The human form is, as such, an inspired revelation, a text upon which God has inscribed the wisdom that leads to knowledge of God. Narsai, as master exegete, exhorts his audience to interpret this text correctly in order to understand the divine mysteries that God has revealed.

¹¹⁸ *Mēmrā* 66 'On the Soul', 355–356 (ed. Mingana 2.247.23–248.1).

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Indices

1. Hebrew Bible / Old Testament

<i>Genesis</i>	6	<i>Joshua</i>	6
1	29		
1:1	28	<i>Judges</i>	6
1:20–21	28	14:5	109
1:26–27	49, 52–55, 58–59, 191		
2	192	<i>Psalms</i>	
2:2	235	116:15	63
2:7	58–59, 163, 170, 191, 231–233, 239	119:98	62
2:18	215	<i>Proverbs</i>	
2:23	205, 208	9:10	230
3	161	25:16	60–66
3:1–8	205	25:27	60–66
3:2	234		
3:5	162	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>	6
3:22	162	12:12	62
6:5–6	158		
8:21	158	<i>Song of Songs</i>	
9:20–27	212, 220	1:4	63
15	35		
18	35–36	<i>Isaiah</i>	6
18:1–15	113		
22	35	<i>Jeremiah</i>	6
28	215		
39	208	<i>Ezekiel</i>	6, 34
		1	56, 63
<i>Exodus</i>	6	1:26	49, 57–59
3:14	32–35		
14:21	28	<i>Daniel</i>	6
33:11	53	1	156
		3	155–157
<i>Leviticus</i>	6		
		<i>Jonah</i>	151–155
<i>Numbers</i>	6		
12:8	52–53		
21:4–9	127, 169		

2. Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

4 Ezra 231

3. New Testament

<i>Matthew</i>		9:1–9	48
5:8	52	9:2	134
7:14	134	19:29	134
12:38–45	151		
15:21–28	199–226	<i>Romans</i>	
16:13–17	52	1:18–32	124
18:10	46	1:23	124
25:1–13	9–23	6	86
28:19	26, 30	6:3–4	86
<i>Luke</i>		<i>1 Corinthians</i>	222
1:26–28	177	1:18–25	120, 122–124, 128, 131
2:44	134	11:3	206
2:52	250	15	183
12:47	61		
15:11–32	84	<i>2 Corinthians</i>	
15:17	166	12:1–4	38, 48–49, 52, 65
<i>John</i>		<i>Ephesians</i>	
3:3	86	2:13–15	125
6:30–32	123		
<i>Acts</i>		<i>Colossians</i>	
9:1–2	52, 65	2:14	195

4. Hellenistic Jewish Authors

Philo	32	<i>Questions and Answers on Genesis</i>	231
<i>On the Creation of the Cosmos</i>	231		

5. Rabbinic and Medieval Jewish Authors and Texts

<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>		<i>Mishnah</i>	
Avodah Zarah		Ḥagigah	
20b	181	2.1	62–64
<i>Bereshit Rabbah</i>		<i>Shi'ur Qomah</i>	57
14:8	232		

<i>Targum</i>		<i>Pseudo-Jonathan</i>	
<i>Neofiti</i>		Gn 2:7	170, 232, 239
Gn 2:7	170	Gn 3:22	162
Gn 3:5	162		
Gn 3:22	162	<i>Tosefta</i>	
<i>Onkelos</i>	162	<i>Hagigah</i>	
Gn 2:7	170, 231–232, 239	2.3–4	62–64

6. Early and Medieval Christian Authors and Texts

- ‘Abdisho’ bar Brikha
Catalogue of Books 1, 6
Acts of John 189
Acts of Thomas 228
Ambrose of Milan
De obitu Theodosii 118
Homilies on Genesis 232
On Isaac and the Soul 238
On Joseph 140, 142
Antony of Tagrit
Rhetoric 98
Antony the Great 145–146
Aphrahat 13, 15, 76, 134
Demonstrations 163, 229, 232–233, 244–245
Apollinaris of Laodicea 84, 233, 235–236, 246, 250
Arius 84
Athanasius of Alexandria
On the Incarnation 124
Augustine of Hippo 190
De anima et eius origine 227
Letters 248
Sermons 202
Two Books on Genesis against the Manicheans 215, 232
Balai 99
Barḥadbshabba 3
Ecclesiastical History 2, 6, 94, 201
The Cause of the Foundation of the Schools 2, 6, 201
Basil of Seleucia 93
Book of Steps 228–229, 233
Chronicle of Siirt 1–2, 6, 55
Clement of Alexandria 189
Third Letter to Nestorius 252
Cyril of Jerusalem 87
Catechetical Lectures 118
Letter to Constantius 118
David Eskolaya
Mēmra ‘On the Discovery of the Cross’ 119, 130
Didascalia apostolorum 53
Diodore of Tarsus 4, 250
Dionysius bar Ṣalibi 119
Doctrina Addai 119
Egeria
Itinerary 118–119
Eliya of al-Anbar
Book of Exercise 62
Emmanuel bar Shahhare
Hexaemeron 6
Ephrem 4, 13, 31, 35, 74, 76, 78, 94, 96, 99, 108, 126, 134, 165, 190, 191, 199, 200, 210–211, 213, 219, 225, 244
Commentary on Genesis 163–164
Hymns against Heresies 32, 94
Hymns on Faith 126
Hymns on Nisibis 137
Hymns on Paradise 137, 229, 245
Ephrem Graecus 93
Epiphanius of Salamis 190
Panarion 53–54
Eunomius 84, 235, 250
Eusebius of Caesarea 190
Eusebius of Emesa 54–55, 58
Eutyches 84, 246
Evagrius of Pontus 39

- George bishop of the Arabs
Letter to John the Stylite on Difficulties in Jacob of Edessa's Letters 106
- Gewargis Warda 6
- Gregory of Nazianzus 190
On the Soul 232
- Gregory of Nyssa 190
On the Making of Man 232
On the Soul and the Resurrection 227, 235–236, 245
- Gregory Thaumaturgus
Ad Tatianum de anima 227
- Gregory the Great 190
- Grigorios bar 'Ebroyo
Chronicon Ecclesiasticum 55
- Hilary of Poitiers
On Matthew 202
- Hudrā* 120
- Hymns on Mary* 184
- Hymns on the Annunciation* 178–179
- Irenaeus
Against Heresies 232
- Isaac of Amid 97–98
- Isaac of Antioch 97–98
- Isaac of Edessa 97–98
- Isaac of Nineveh 62
- Isho'dad of Merv
Commentary on the Old Testament 5–6
- Jacob bar Shakkō
Book of Dialogues 98–99
- Jacob of Edessa 99, 106
First Letter to John the Stylite of Litarba 98
- Jacob of Serugh 4, 7, 49, 74, 78, 86–87, 93–115, 119, 165, 191, 200, 219, 222, 229
Mēmra 'On Ephrem' (B² 24 = B¹ 33) 94
Mēmra 'On Cain and Abel 1' (B² 39 = B¹ 60) 100, 109, 136
Mēmra 'On the Passover of the Law' (B² 49 = B¹ 75) 100
Mēmra 'On Sodom 1' (B² 83 = B¹ 125) 100, 112
Mēmra 'On Palm Sunday' (B² 108 = B¹ 157) 7
- Mēmra 'On the Fall of the Chosen'* (B² 123 = B¹ 180) 100, 104–105, 109–112
- Mēmra 'On Samson'* (B² 134 = B¹ 202) 100, 109–111
- Mēmra 'On Jonah'* (B² 140 = B¹ 209) 151
- Mēmra 'On Martyrs'* (B² 162 = B¹ 244) 97
- Mēmra 'On Cain and Abel 4'* (B² 177 = B¹ 269) 100, 136
- Mēmra 'On Sodom 2'* (B² 213 = B¹ 321) 100, 109
- Mēmra 'On Sodom 3'* (B² 280 = B¹ 406) 100, 104, 111–113
- Mēmra 'Against the Jews 1'* (B² 283 = B¹ 410) 59
- Mēmra 'On Melchizedek'* (B² 289 = B¹ 419) 100, 102, 109–111
- Mēmra 'On the Holy Fast of Forty Days'* (B² 304 = B¹ 440) 20
- Mēmra 'On Sodom 4'* (B² 311 = B¹ 448) 100, 104, 109–112
- Mēmra 'On Queen Helena and the Discovery of the Cross'* (B² 313 = B¹ 452) 119
- Mēmra 'On Cain and Abel 3'* (B² 317 = B¹ 462) 100, 102, 104, 110–112, 136
- Mēmra 'On the Chariot that the Prophet Ezekiel Saw'* (B² 337 = B¹ 490) 55–60
- Mēmra 'On Cain and Abel 2'* (B² 356 = B¹ 511) 100, 109, 111, 136
- Mēmra 'On the Spectacles of the Theater'* (likely spurious) 97
- Letter 14* 3, 55
- Prose Homilies* 97
- Jerome 190, 226
- Jerusalem Liturgy 87
- John Cassian
Conferences of the Desert Fathers 51–52, 59
- John Chrysostom 165, 177
Homilies on Genesis 232
- (Pseudo-)John Chrysostom 93
- John of Dara 119–120
- Judas Kyriakos Legend 120
- Justin Martyr 81

- Life of Ephrem* 94
Life of Pshoi (Bishop) 146
- Macrina 235–236, 245
 Mani 84, 189
 Marcion 84
 Mārī b. Sulaymān
 Kitāb al-Majdal 55
 Melitio of Sardis 93
 Mēm̄rē ‘*On Joseph*’ (pseudonymous) 7
 Moshe bar Kephā 119–120
- Narsai
 Mēm̄rā 1 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (I)*’ 32–37, 95, 100, 104, 107, 109
 Mēm̄rā 2 ‘*On Revelations to Patriarchs and Prophets (II)*’ 29, 31, 35, 37–38, 135–136
 Mēm̄rā 3 ‘*On Revelations to Abraham*’ 136, 141–142
 Mēm̄rā 4 ‘*On the Nativity*’ 179–181, 194
 Mēm̄rā 5 ‘*On Mary*’ 201
 Mēm̄rā 6 ‘*On Epiphany*’ 30, 34, 84, 89–91, 191–196
 Mēm̄rā 7 ‘*On John the Baptist*’ 134
 Mēm̄rā 8 ‘*On Peter and Paul*’ 31, 38, 41–67
 Mēm̄rā 9 ‘*On the Four Evangelists*’ 31
 Mēm̄rā 11 ‘*On the Three Doctors*’ 4, 31–32
 Mēm̄rā 13 ‘*On Supplication*’ 31, 34, 157–159
 Mēm̄rā 14 ‘*On Jonah*’ 99, 151–155, 161, 167–169, 172
 Mēm̄rā 15 ‘*On Reproof*’ 31
 Mēm̄rā 17 ‘*For Any Saints Day*’ 8, 172
 Mēm̄rā 18 ‘*On the Departed and the Resurrection*’ 100, 110–111
 Mēm̄rā 19 ‘*On Works*’ 11, 16, 99, 134, 136, 138–139, 148–151
 Mēm̄rā 20 ‘*On Lent I*’ 142
 Mēm̄rā 23 ‘*On Lent III*’ 135
 Mēm̄rā 24 ‘*On Lent IV*’ 100, 109, 134, 142, 161
 Mēm̄rā 25 ‘*On Reproof*’ 3
 Mēm̄rā 27 ‘*On the Parable of the Ten Virgins*’ 9–23, 100, 109–111, 201
- Mēm̄rā 28 ‘*On the Raising of Lazarus*’ 142
 Mēm̄rā 29 ‘*On Palm Sunday*’ 7, 95, 100, 107–111
 Mēm̄rā 30 ‘*On Palm Sunday*’ 6–7
 Mēm̄rā 32 ‘*On the Canaanite Woman*’ 8, 199–226
 Mēm̄rā 33 ‘*On the Prodigal Son*’ 16, 21, 161, 166–169
 Mēm̄rā 35 ‘*On the Mysteries*’ 7, 97
 Mēm̄rā 36 ‘*On the Passion*’ 172
 Mēm̄rā 37 ‘*On the Repentant Thief*’ 100, 104
 Mēm̄rā 38 ‘*On Mysteries and Baptism*’ 25–40, 69–91, 182
 Mēm̄rā 39 ‘*On Baptism*’ 25–40, 69–91, 100–102, 195
 Mēm̄rā 42 ‘*On the Martyrs*’ 134
 Mēm̄rā 43 ‘*On the Martyrs*’ 6, 97
 Mēm̄rā 44 ‘*On New Sunday*’ 34, 39, 100–102, 110
 Mēm̄rā 45 ‘*On the Ascension*’ 171
 Mēm̄rā 46 ‘*On Pentecost*’ 30
 Mēm̄rā 47 ‘*On the Workers in the Vineyard*’ 137
 Mēm̄rā 48 ‘*On the Rich Man and Lazarus*’ 15–17, 21
 Mēm̄rā 49 ‘*On Creation IV*’ 136, 164, 170, 201
 Mēm̄rā 50 ‘*On Humility*’ 134
 Mēm̄rā 51 ‘*On the Antichrist*’ 8
 Mēm̄rā 53 ‘*On the Wheat and the Tares*’ 135
 Mēm̄rā 54 ‘*On the Finding of the Cross*’ 35, 99, 117–132, 136
 Mēm̄rā 55 ‘*On the Bronze Serpent*’ 127, 161, 167, 169–170
 Mēm̄rā 58 ‘*On Isaiah’s Vision*’ 38
 Mēm̄rā 61 ‘*On Creation II*’ 28–29, 192–193
 Mēm̄rā 62 ‘*On Creation III*’ 34–35, 59
 Mēm̄rā 63 ‘*On Creation I*’ 29, 193
 Mēm̄rā 64 ‘*On Creation V*’ 34
 Mēm̄rā 65 ‘*On Creation VI*’ 171
 Mēm̄rā 66 ‘*On the Soul*’ 99, 227–253
 Mēm̄rā 68 ‘*On the Tower of Babel*’ 193
 Mēm̄rā 69 ‘*On Job*’ 16–18, 134, 136–138, 140

- Mēmṛā* 70 'On Joseph' 18, 133–134, 137–140, 142–143
Mēmṛā 71 'On the Flood' 136–137, 193
Mēmṛā 72 'On the Miracles of Moses' 34, 136
Mēmṛā 73 'On Samson' 100, 109, 136
Mēmṛā 74 'On David and Saul' 134, 136, 161, 164–166, 168, 171, 193, 195–196
Mēmṛā 75 'On Solomon' 101–104
Mēmṛā 76 'On Enoch and Elijah' 100, 104, 135–136, 194
Mēmṛā 77 'On the Three Children' 155–157
Mēmṛā 80 'On Reproof of Women' 3, 31, 142–143, 199–226
Mēmṛā 81 'On John 1:14' 246, 251
(Pseudo-)Narsai
Soḡyātā 7, 201
Nemesius of Emesa
On the Nature of Man 227–228, 233, 235–236, 238–239, 247, 248, 253
Nestorius 4, 41, 43, 249
Nag Hammadi Codices
Apocryphon of John 232
Exegesis of the Soul 227
Hypostasis of the Archons 232
Trimorphic Protennoia 232
Origen 189
Homily on Isaiah 62
(Pseudo-)Origen
Homily on Psalm 38:11 62
Paul of Samosata 84
Paulinus of Nola
Letter 31 118
Philoxenus of Mabbug 30, 39
Commentary on Luke 250
Discourses 153
Letter to All Orthodox Monks in Orient 54
Letter to the Monks of Tell 'Adā 122, 130
Philaletes 250
Proba
Commentary on Aristotle's On Interpretation 106
Pseudo-Clementines
Homily 17 46–48, 50–53, 58, 60, 65–66
Pseudo-Dionysius
Celestial Hierarchy 184
Romanos Melodos 199
Socrates of Constantinople
Ecclesiastical History 51
Solomon of Baṣra
Book of the Bee 244
Sozomen
Ecclesiastical History 51
Teaching of Addai see *Doctrina Addai*
Tertullian 189
On the Dress of Women 142, 204
On the Soul 227, 232
Theodore of Mopsuestia 4, 26, 31, 41, 43, 69, 71–72, 74–76, 91, 177, 182, 201, 249
Catechetical Homilies 26, 72–73, 78–79, 84, 86–87, 183
Commentary on Matthew 202
On the Incarnation 250
Theodoret of Cyrrhus
Ecclesiastical History 54
On the Incarnation 247, 252
Theodoros bar Koni
Scholion 54
Timothy I 5
Letter 47 5
Valentinus 84
Yawsep Huzaya
Syriac translation of Dionysios Thrax's
Art of Grammar 106

7. Classical (Greek and Latin) Authors and Texts

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>Alexander of Aphrodisias
<i>Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima</i>
228, 238, 241</p> <p>Ammianus Marcellinus
<i>Res Gestae</i> 189</p> <p>Ammonias Saccas 247–248</p> <p>Aristotle 237–238
<i>De anima</i> 22, 228, 241
<i>On Interpretation</i> 106
<i>Organon</i> 106</p> <p>Dionysios Thrax
<i>Art of Grammar</i> 106</p> <p>Euripides
<i>Phoenician Woman</i> 221</p> <p>Galen
<i>The Faculties of the Soul Follow the
Mixture of the Body</i> 228</p> | <p>Hermogenes
<i>On Invention</i> 14</p> <p>Iamblichus of Apamea
<i>De Anima</i> 228, 236, 242</p> <p>Plato 39, 237–238
<i>Phaedo</i> 228
<i>Phaedrus</i> 228, 241–242
<i>Timaeus</i> 228</p> <p>Plotinus 233, 247
<i>Enneads</i> 228, 238–239, 241</p> <p>Porphyry of Tyre
<i>On Abstinence</i> 228, 239</p> <p>Procopius of Caesarea
<i>Persian War</i> 56</p> |
|---|--|

8. Papyri

- P. Mich. XVII (Michigan Medical Codex) 181

9. Subjects

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>Amida 56</p> <p>Antioch(ene) 3, 4, 26, 46, 50, 54, 122, 233,
235–236, 246–247, 249–252</p> <p>Apostrophe <i>see under</i> Rhetoric</p> <p>Audian(s) 53–54</p> <p>‘Ayn Dulba 2</p> <p>Baghdad 7, 202</p> <p>Baptism 6, 25–40, 69–91, 121, 129, 149, 177,
182–183, 195</p> <p>Barşawma 3</p> <p>Calendio 122</p> | <p><i>Captatio benevolentiae see under</i> Rhetoric</p> <p>Chalcedon <i>see</i> Council of Chalcedon</p> <p>Christology 4, 42–60, 72–73, 82–91,
117, 121–122, 130, 148, 151, 164, 201, 217,
246–253</p> <p>Constantine I 118–119, 129</p> <p>Council of Chalcedon 1, 201</p> <p>Council of Elvira 189</p> <p>Council of Ephesus (431) 1, 119</p> <p>Council of Ephesus (449) 1</p> <p>Diyarbakır 7, 201–202</p> <p>Dura-Europos 189</p> |
|---|---|

- Edessa 41, 53–55, 89, 121, 130, 188, 190, 197.
See also School of Edessa
- Edict of Diocletian 188
- Emessa (Ḥomṣ) 54
- Ephesus *see* Council of Ephesus (431) *and*
 Council of Ephesus (449)
- Erbil 201
- Ethopoeia see under* Rhetoric
- Eucharist 25–26, 38, 57, 70, 72, 88–89,
 147, 182
- Exordium see under* Rhetoric
- Fabius Pictor 188
- Helena 118–119, 129
- Ḥomṣ *see* Emessa
- Iaia of Cyzicus 188
- Incarnation 38–39, 43, 44, 58, 83, 191, 194,
 203, 208, 211, 216–217
- Interrogatio see under* Rhetoric
- Mamai 3, 225
- Manichaen(s) 39, 189
- Merkavah 56–57
- Messalian(s) 54
- Monastery of Kfar Mari 2
- Mosul 201
- Nisibis 3, 41, 197, 225. *See also* School of
 Nisibis
- Origenist Controversy 51
- Peroratio see under* Rhetoric
- Peter the Fuller 122
- Protonike 119
- Rabbula Gospels 190
- Resurrection 19, 38, 77, 85–88, 148, 151,
 154–155, 158–159, 180, 183, 195, 243–245
- Rhetoric 13–15, 230
 apostrophe 15
captatio benevolentiae 14
ethopoeia 20, 218
exordium 14
interrogatio 16
peroratio 13
- School of Edessa 2–3, 41, 55, 66–67, 147,
 201, 207–208
- School of Nisibis 2–3, 41, 66–67, 106, 147,
 201, 207–208
- Seleucia-Ctesiphon 43
- Shapur II 188
- Synod of 410 (under Isaac) 43–44
- Tetragrammaton 25, 32–33
- Trisagion 117–132
- Valentinian(s) 39, 84
- Zeno 2–3
- Zoroastrian(s) 72–82, 89–91